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**THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL  
ORGANIZATIONS IN AIDING POOR  
COMMUNITIES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES:  
The experience of the Consumers' Association  
of Penang, Malaysia\***

Khor Kok Peng\*\*

1. *THE POOR AS VICTIMS OF DEVELOPMENT*

In many Third World countries, 'development' is taking place at a rapid pace. However, many social scientists and economists have serious doubts as to whether the present model of development is really beneficial to the poor.

All too often, 'development projects' are selected by governments to introduce symbols of ultra-modernism (super-highways, sixty-story skyscrapers, multi-million-dollar dams) which have little meaning to the lives of the rural poor. Even more alarming is the fact that millions of farmers and food producers are being pushed aside, marginalised and displaced for the sake of 'development.' In Brazil's Amazon jungle, hundreds of thousands of native people are being forced out of their homelands as forests are logged. Hundreds of traditional fishing communities in South and Southeast Asia are suffering from dwindling incomes as high-powered trawler boats scoop up the best part of the catch. Grazing land and food-producing farms are being demolished on a large scale to make way for dams, factory zones, western-style suburban housing estates and road construction.

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Ironically, the poor are thus often made victims rather than beneficiaries of 'development.' To add insult to injury, they are usually told that there are 'inevitable costs' to be borne in development, and 'everyone has to make a sacrifice.' Needless to say, it is not inevitable that the poor be made to 'pay' for development, and it is a scandal that their livelihood or homes have to be sacrificed for a development that principally benefits a small elite. Poor communities are, however, in general not sufficiently organized and lack the confidence to voice their plight or represent their problems to the relevant authorities. Too often, therefore, they suffer in silence.

## 2. *THE ROLE NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs) CAN PLAY*

Ideally, poor communities should participate in development programmes that improve their resource base, provide more employment and income. Basic amenities such as housing, sanitation, clean water, garbage disposal, health services and education should be made available to these communities. But just as important, and perhaps before all else, they should not be displaced and made even poorer through development projects.

In this context, non-governmental organizations have a crucial role to play in protecting and enhancing the interests of poor communities. Not being subject to bureaucratic controls as are government agencies, NGOs can become important groups helping the poor to express their needs and views and mobilize them to make their demands felt in the larger political, planning and economic arena.

NGOs can perform the following functions:

1. Help the community identify and discuss its problems. Very often the first impediment to action by the poor is their inability to recognize their problems as legitimate issues on which they can make demands.
2. Give confidence to the community that these problems can be resolved if its members are prepared to organize themselves and have the will to act.
3. Provide a link between the community and relevant government authorities; lawyers, scientists and academics; the mass media; and other communities and groups. The intellectuals and professionals may give much needed help; the media can publicize the issue and thus involve the public at large; and this will give a push (especially to the authorities) to resolve the problem.

The following are some activities which could be done in achieving the above:

1. In identifying community problems, a check should be made of basic amenities and needs. Does the community have proper water, sanitation, garbage collection, lighting and public transport facilities? Discussions should be carried out with various families to determine what their major problems are regarding unfulfilled basic needs.

2. If the community is facing a major problem involving displacement of its livelihood, a thorough study should be made on the causes and the legal aspects. Find out which government authorities (state or federal government, district office, land office, health department, water department, environment agency?) are involved so that the villages can make representations to them to act on the problem.

3. The community should be encouraged to select an 'action committee' responsible for taking up the issue and for mobilizing the community. This committee should be drawn from among active and dynamic villagers with a strong desire to resolve the problems. It need not be led by traditional community elites, although an understanding needs to be established between the 'action committee' and the traditional leaders. The NGO should work closely with this group rather than do the actual work itself.

4. The NGO can help the action committee draft petitions and letters, which should be adopted and signed by all members of the community. These should be sent to the authorities or the parties concerned, with copies to the press.

5. The NGO could organize a visit to the community for the press and for interested individuals (lawyers, students, academics), so that the issue can be publicized.

6. Sympathetic professionals should be asked to help (e.g. lawyers to give legal opinions or take legal measures; doctors to carry out tests and give medical aid; scientists to conduct analysis of pollution; economists to estimate income losses; as the case may be).

7. The 'action committee' should prepare itself to meet with government officials and other parties (e.g. directors of companies polluting their river) and to make appropriate demands at the meetings.

8. All families in the community should be kept informed of developments and should actively participate in decision-making through regular meetings chaired by the 'action committee.'

In the implementation of the above measures, an NGO should act as a catalyst, setting in motion a process in which the community chooses its own trusted leaders, mobilizes itself and represents its problems to the authorities and the public. The actual processes of decision-making, mobilization and representation are carried out by the community. The NGO

must work with and not for the community, otherwise the action will not succeed.

### 3. *THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION OF PENANG (CAP)*

The Consumers' Association of Penang is an NGO in Malaysia taking up development issues from a broad consumer perspective. Besides protecting consumers from business malpractices, it is involved in issues concerning basic needs, rational use of resources, environmental pollution, culture and lifestyles. Its activities include research, publications, educational programmes, media work, and helping poor communities to voice their problems.

In its work with communities, CAP is involved in two major types of issues: basic needs and amenities; environmental problems and the disruption of a community's livelihood.

#### (i) *Basic Needs and Amenities*

In the area of *basic needs and amenities*, CAP staff conduct a 'house counselling' educational programme in villages and estates during which basic principles of nutrition, health, budgeting, credit and other topics are discussed with the families, usually the woman of the house. At such sessions, the villagers also bring up pressing problems which they face. Very often these are 'simple problems' such as the irregularity of the village bus service, or the high prices charged at the sole village shop. These complaints are discussed with villagers in a group, and then the CAP staff helps the community to act on the problem by, for example, writing to the bus company concerned (with a copy to the Municipal authorities, the Road and Transport Department and the press) or by getting the villagers to have a heart-to-heart talk with the shop owner. These actions are sometimes successful, but more often require a prolonged period of continuous pressure on the part of the villagers. What is important is that the community begins to recognize its common problems, to actively do something to overcome them, and thus to educate themselves in justly demanding their rights.

Recently, many rural communities in the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia complained to CAP staff that the nightsoil was left uncollected for several days in their villages. In the rainy season, the waste material overflowed the bins and polluted house compounds, threatening the health of thousands of people. The problem was prevalent in villages still using the 'bucket toilet' system where waste is collected in buckets placed under

the toilet. Contractors are hired by the municipal authorities to collect the nightsoil but the services provided are often inadequate and irregular, collection taking place once a week or once in ten days. Four villages with a combined population of 3,000 complained that sixty-four small children were found suffering from jaundice due to the health hazards posed by overflowing waste.

CAP staff paid several visits to the communities to investigate the problem, and helped the villagers organize themselves. Petition letters signed by hundreds of residents were handed to the municipal authorities. Journalists who visited the affected areas publicized the problem in the newspapers. Eventually, the municipal authorities improved their services, though not yet to the villagers' full satisfaction. What is important, however, is that these poor communities now have the confidence and experience to stand up for their rights. If the waste disposal system should again deteriorate, or other basic problems arise, they will now act to rectify the situation and not merely grumble or meekly accept their fate.

Another important amenity often taken for granted by urban dwellers is the telephone. In the rural areas where the transportation network is poorly developed, a public telephone booth becomes an indispensable means of communication, especially in emergencies when the fire brigade, police or ambulance are required. In many villages, CAP found that public telephones were one of the most acutely felt needs of the poor. Yet many areas are still deprived of this simple facility. As a result, CAP has helped several communities to draft letters and petitions to the Telecoms Department requesting the installation of a phone booth in their village. In half the villages, the authorities finally acceded to the request after several reminders and even more months; in the unsuccessful villages, more letters and reminders are being persistently sent. Last year, CAP also sent a memorandum to the federal government asking for more emphasis and funds to be allocated for public telephones in poor communities, which have been hitherto neglected despite billions of dollars spent on sophisticated telecommunications facilities. The villages CAP had helped were cited as examples of the importance of the telephone at grass-roots level. In this way, CAP is able not only to help individual communities but also to bring the common problems of these communities into national focus for the attention of the authorities.

(ii) *Environmental Problems And Dislocation  
Of Community's Livelihood*

An even more serious type of problem in rural communities concerns environmental issues and the dislocation of sources of livelihood. These

problems are revealed to CAP staff during visits to villages, or, increasingly, through letters written by the community to CAP. Most of the affected communities are fishing villages or food-producing farms. In Malaysia, as in other Southeast Asian countries, hundreds of traditional fishing communities are threatened by marine pollution and invasion of their territorial waters by trawler boats. In Penang state alone, the marketable fish catch dropped by 60% between 1966 and 1980, according to the Ministry of Agriculture. At the same time, vegetable and fruit farms have been asked to make way for government development projects or private-sector activity (such as house construction). In the state of Penang, the acreage of cultivated vegetables fell by 8% between 1977 to 1981 while the acreage for eleven types of popular fruit dropped by 9% between 1976 to 1980. The farmers may be tenants or squatters and clearing them out can be done under the law. If they are owners of the land, the government can acquire their property and pay compensation, which is a poor substitute for income-generating farmland. During the initial contact made with the community, CAP staff makes a survey of the situation with the villagers. Facts on the social, economic and environmental aspects of the problem are analyzed. Discussions are held with some villagers, usually those who had been active enough to bring the problem to CAP's attention.

During the initial contact made with the community, CAP staff makes a survey of the situation with the villagers. Facts on the social, economic and environmental aspects of the problem are analyzed. Discussions are held with some villagers, usually those who had been active enough to bring the problem to CAP's attention.

During the discussions, natural leaders emerge, who may sometimes be different from the traditional village leadership. Usually, the younger people in the community are more eager to take up the problem, and they emerge as the active elements. In some cases, they may form an 'action committee' responsible for mobilizing the community; in other cases, these informal leaders work through the already established village leadership structure. In either case, the traditional leaders have to become involved, at least in giving their approval, so that a unity of action can be achieved. NGOs have to be very sensitive to this interplay of village relationships.

There will then follow a period of intense discussion within the community, with decisions taken to send letters or petitions to government departments and ministries concerned with the issue, to the private companies concerned (if the problem is caused by them), to the press and other groups which could help. A response is then awaited. Newspapers

may publicize the community's statement, or send reporters to do in-depth feature articles. Government officials may visit the community to conduct their own investigations or meet the villagers. The community's leaders make certain requests or demands (stop the pollution, or relocate the road project elsewhere, or raise the compensation level) and negotiations are carried out. The process is usually prolonged, stretching to several months or years. Seldom is there complete success from the community's point of view; often there is partial success; sometimes only a frustration of hopes. However, the community builds up a capacity for representing its interests to the government and the public. The depressed villages become revitalized with the optimism that comes from positive action to solve one's own problems. At the level of national planning, the voices of the poor communities, the 'victims of development,' are heard.

The following are some communities facing problems of livelihood with which CAP has been working recently:

(a) The riverine fishing village of *Kuala Juru* had its livelihood almost destroyed when factories at a nearby Free Trade Zone discharged effluents into the river, killing off fish life. CAP helped the villagers to publicize and represent their problems to the authorities. The village youth collected water samples from the polluted river and these were analyzed by university-based scientists who volunteered their services. The tests confirmed a high level of pollution. The fishermen formed an action committee which met the State's Chief Minister and a number of Federal Ministers. The effluents were then diverted away from the river to the sea directly, but still pose a potential threat to the new cockle (shellfish) sea-bed farms now cultivated by a cooperative set up by the villagers. The new cockle project is economically very successful. The success of the village has been largely due to able and dynamic leadership in the 'action committee' which eventually also managed the cockle project. CAP's role was advisory and catalytic in nature.

(b) *Kuala Kedah* is a rice-growing village whose crops were destroyed by effluent discharge from a chemical factory into the village stream. CAP helped the farmers take up the case to the State authorities, the factory and the environment department. After initial resistance, the factory paid compensation to the affected villages, but the method of payment and the small sum did not satisfy the farmers. Occasionally the pollution still threatens the crops.

(c) Famous for its fruits and spices, the village of *Balik Pulau* underwent a traumatic experience when a road was built through the nearby hills. Rocks blasted during the construction were dumped indiscriminately down the hill slopes, destroying dozens of acres of prime fruit and rubber trees. Due to the uprooting of the trees, the land and rivers also silted up. A few young farmers contacted CAP



and then organized a joint petition sent to various governments authorities, including the police. Journalists visiting the site gave prominence to the farmers' plight in the newspapers. A meeting was then held between the farmers' representatives, the State Public Works Department Chief and the managing director of the private road-building company. Eventually the dumping of rocks was stopped and the company paid the farmers compensation for their losses. This was, however, only a partial success because the compensation was inadequate and also could not replace the loss of future earnings caused by destruction of their land.

(d) *Bagan Lallang*, a vegetable-farming and poultry-keeping village, was flooded under two feet of water for two months when a housing developer blocked the flow of the village stream. Due to the flood, crops and livestock were destroyed and houses were damaged. CAP staff aided the villagers to draft letters and petitions, and several meetings were held between the village leaders, the principal authorities and the housing developer. Students from the consumer club of a nearby secondary school carried out a house-to-house survey of losses incurred by the flood. Eventually the developer agreed to dig a new drainage canal through the village and to pay compensation to the villagers based on the students' survey.

(e) The Penang east coast foreshore area (facing the seafront) houses several thousands of fishermen, petty traders and shipyard workers who depend on the sea for a living. Their livelihood is threatened by a plan to construct an offshore highway which will close down several small shipyards and block the fishermen's access to the sea. The residents contacted CAP, which helped them to carry out a survey of the socio-economic impact of the highway. This was used as the basis of a petition signed by 3,000 residents appealing against the highway. Recently the government announced that the project has been 'shelved,' due probably to lack of funds caused by the current economic recession.

In the event of an economic recovery, the project may proceed again.

(f) The 350-acre *Thean Teik Estate* is a major vegetable-producing area in Penang. Owned by a private clan association, the land has been rented out to farmers for several decades. In 1981, the 520 households (with 12,000 residents) were asked to vacate the land to make way for a housing estate project. Bulldozers were sent in to destroy some of the crops, and violent fights occurred during one of which a woman resident was shot dead and others injured in 1982. The residents' association has been working with CAP in the drafting of appeal letters. The farmers are asking that a portion of the land be preserved as farmland or that, at the least, the compensation offered by the developer be raised. When negotiations failed, CAP lawyers helped some farmers to take their case to court. However, the Supreme Court unexpectedly ruled that landowners can use "reasonable force" to evict tenants. CAP is now engaged in a campaign to reform landlord-tenant rights.

#### 4. *SOME CONCLUSIONS*

The experience of CAP shows that NGOs do have and can play an important constructive role in helping to articulate the felt needs, grievances and problems of grass-roots communities and to channel these to the relevant government authorities and the larger society. In this process, the community is able to make its voice heard and can begin to look after its interests in the context of national economic planning and development. How successful the community is in doing so varies from case to case, depending on factors such as the quality of leadership and degree of cohesion among the villagers, the extent of sympathy in public opinion, and the response of the state authorities or private companies involved. As stressed earlier, the role of the NGO in this process is that of a catalyst, a facilitator and a help, not as the main agent of action which is the community itself. An NGO possesses certain skills such as the ability to conduct surveys, carry out tests and library research, draft letters and statements and conceptually link local-level problems to national issues. It also has the potential to contact and draw in professionals such as lawyers, doctors, scientists, academics, teachers and also government officials to carry out various tasks in helping poor communities. What the NGO needs is the dedication, determination and correct methods to perform its role. Experience and effectiveness will then follow. And the role it can play is not only vital but perhaps also indispensable if poor communities are to build up the capacity to genuinely participate in development.

