Is climate change an issue in developing Asia Pacific?

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Asia Pacific Workshop and Open Film Screening: Changing Climate & Moving Pictures

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We are delighted to partner with TVE Japan in co-organising this workshop. I have great pleasure in welcoming all of you joining us from across the Asia Pacific and from Japan.

When the idea of this workshop was first raised, we were keen that it does not become yet another meeting on climate, organised at some cost to the very climate! We wanted it to have clear focus and practical objectives.

And that's why we will be looking at two aspects directly relevant to our work as journalists and professional communicators:

- The first session will discuss the public understanding of climate change in the participating Asian countries and societies. We will also take a look at how the government, business and citizens in Japan are responding to climate change.

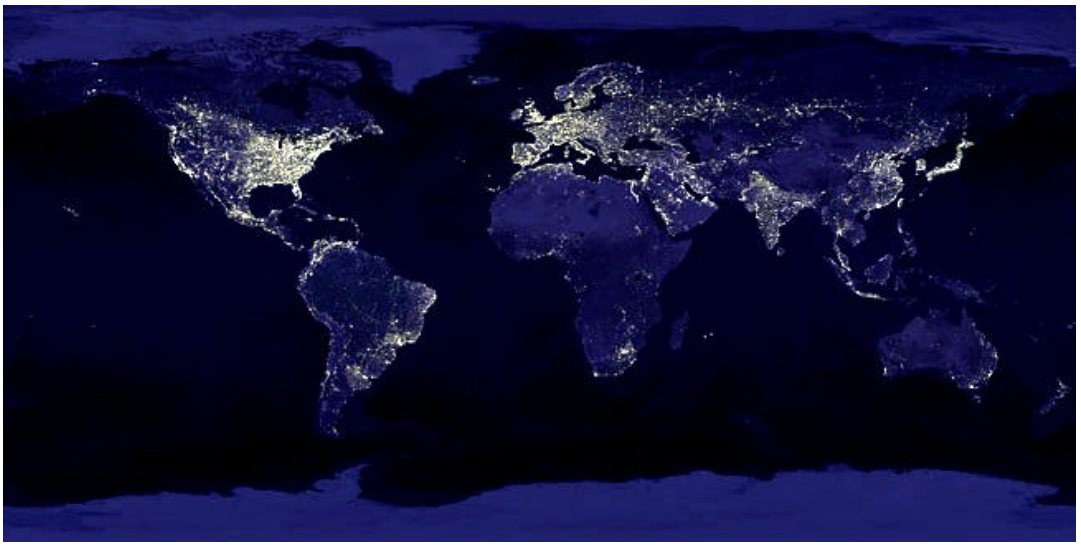
- In the second session, we will explore the nexus between our audio-visual media and climate change. In this, we hope to cover broadcast television, narrowcast video and also moving images placed online.

In opening this workshop, I would like to pose a central question: **Is climate change an issue in developing Asia Pacific?**

I would respond by breaking it down to four further questions, which I will attempt to answer.

- Where does climate fit into public perception in developing Asia?
- Do ordinary people discern climate change as a separate issue?
- How can we promote greater public understanding of climate & development?

- Is climate the new HIV of our times?



The world at night: composite image made up using data from the Defence Meteorological Satellite Programme, USA. The data relate to how the planet at night was on 27 November 2000, extracted from website: http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/ap001127.html

I'm fond of showing this image whenever I talk about sustainable development – because it says so much without using a single word. The illuminated areas of our world at night indicate higher levels of socio-economic development and better infrastructure. It shows both the uneven distribution of people as well as various disparities in economic development.

When we zoom into the Asia Pacific region, we begin to see what this means for our region. There are large parts of our region that don't register its nightlights on this planetary scale. They are home to tens of millions who are not yet part of the Asian economic boom.

When climate change concerns first emerged 20 years ago, we used to talk about Asia Pacific mostly as an 'impactee' of climate change -- one that will be hit hard by anticipated impacts. We now know more about when and how such impacts could happen. But in the past two decades, Asia's role as 'impactor' has grown steadily, especially with the economic rise of China and India, but also helped by other energy-hungry economies such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Taken together with the industrialised economies such as Australia, Korea and Japan, our region is now a key contributor of greenhouse gases.

There have been many studies, including the UN IPCC assessments, discussing what impacts we can expect. Just a few months ago, the **Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2008**, issued by the United Nations ESCAP every April, cautioned us: *"The impact of climate change on the Asia-Pacific region could be immense. Rising temperatures could result in sea-level rise, melting of glaciers, water-stress, land erosion, forest fires, and diseases with devastating effects, particularly on the poor."*

Particularly on the poor -- those words are hugely significant considering that the Asia Pacific home to more poor people than in any other region of our world. This is a fact and facet about Asia that is not always acknowledged in the media coverage or academic discussions.

So is climate change a priority issue when many of our countries are grappling with massive problems of under-development and malgovernance?

Is it a luxury to worry about what is likely to happen in 10 or 30 or 50 years time when hundreds of millions of people are struggling to survive *here and today*?

An emphatic answer comes from Wangari Maathai, the founder of Kenya's Greenbelt Movement and winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. She says: *"For the global South, and especially Africa, environmental issues are not a luxury. Arresting the world's warming and protecting and restoring our natural systems are issues of life and death for much of the world's population."*

But are these links sufficiently and widely understood by those who make policy - or influence such policy - in the global South? I'm not so sure – and that tells me there's a role for as us as media communicators.

And when it comes to communicating climate change to uninformed, ill-informed or skeptical audiences, Al Gore knows a thing or two. This is what he says in his acclaimed film, *An Inconvenient Truth*:
"It's human nature to take time to connect the dots. I know that. But I also know there can be a day of reckoning when you wish you had connected the dots more quickly."

I used to describe my job as one trying to make sense of our topsy-turvy world, but I'd happily settle for 'connecting the dots'. This is what we as journalists covering development issues must do everyday in our work:

- link the macro with the micro; and
- find inter-relationships and inter-dependencies that aren't always self evident.

This reminds of me a piece of advice given by the late Tarzie Vittachi (1921-1993), the Sri Lankan-born journalist and editor who was a pioneer in development journalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Long before climate change became an issue, he was speaking metaphorically to fellow

journalists when he said: *"Ordinary people live and work in the day-to-day weather. Most can't relate to long-term climate. It's our job to make those links."*

Making those links is not always easy, especially if we want to avoid sensationalism, scare-mongering and other excesses that often characterize media coverage on climate change.

We can't cover climate simply by flipping from one IPCC assessment report to another, or by hopping from one climate related UN conference to another. Important as they are, these are mere dots that make up only a small part of the bigger picture.

Perhaps no one – not even Nobel laureates Al Gore and Rajendra Pachauri – yet knows the *full picture* as that still keeps emerging. We have a limited understanding of the planet's intricate and inter-linked natural systems. Some processes — such as how climate change would impact different geographical regions, natural cycles and ecosystems — are only just beginning to be understood. We know more about the surface of the Moon than about the bottom of the oceans on our planet. We have only recently had some useful glimpses into the complex world of micro-organisms.

Despite these limitations of knowledge, it *is* possible to form some perspectives. And I believe our audiences expect such perspective from us just as much as they want us to provide facts and figures.

And if we don't give enough perspective, we can inadvertently create distortions in people's perceptions. As in this cartoon -- which appeared in a magazine 25 years ago, when a superpower nuclear war was the major planetary threat.

Of course, climate is not just another environmental issue or the latest planetary scare. This time we're in deep trouble – and still finding out how deep. It has brought into sharp focus the crisis in:

- how we grow economically;
- how we share natural resources and energy; and
- how we relate to each other in different parts of the world.

In that sense, climate change is acting like a prism, helping to split our worldly experience into individual issues, concerns and problems that combine to create it. Climate shows up the enormous development disparities within our individual societies and also between them. When

this happens, we realise that climate is not just a scientific or environmental problem, but one that also has social, political, security, ethical and human rights dimensions.

I see some parallels between the current climate crisis and the HIV/AIDS pandemic that emerged 25 years ago.

Consider these similarities:

- When HIV was first detected, it was considered a medical issue affecting specific sections of society.
- It took years for the wider societal, development and human rights aspects to be understood and accepted.
- Some countries and cultures wasted years in denial; a few are still in this mode.
- It took overwhelming impact evidence and mounting pressure from affected persons for states and international community to respond.
- Then everybody jumped the bandwagon and HIV became a fundable, lucrative enterprise.
- The UN created an inter-agency mechanism called UNAIDS which has evolved into a behemoth whose efficacy and relevance are now being questioned.

This makes me wonder: is climate the new HIV of our times? If so, I sincerely hope it does not evolve in the same manner that HIV crisis did. There are worrying signs that the drive towards a low carbon economy is being exploited by various groups – including some in civil society – for self gain.

So what is to be done? It doesn't help anyone if we run around like Chicken Licken who shouted the sky was falling.

Nearly a year ago, I listened to a talk by the well known Filipino academic-activist Walden Bello, who heads the Focus on Global South in Bangkok. He lamented how the climate change debates were slowly but surely turning into self-serving arguments for preserving the status quo.

He said: *"Dealing with climate change requires building up a mass movement at the grassroots across the developing countries of the global South. But we can't rely on the elites and the middle class to decisively change course. At best, they will only procrastinate."*

This is part of our challenge: how do we take climate change discussions beyond the charmed development circle to engage and involve those who are living on the edge of climate impact everyday?

We're not politicians or scientists or activists, even if some of us might sympathise with scientific or activist positions.

As journalists, how can we do justice to the biggest story of our times? Do we dutifully amplify the findings of scientists, declarations of UN officials and statements by our governments and stop there? Or do we go in search of those whose voices are not yet being heard -- or heeded?

And do we remain as passive reporters and dispassionate analysts, or become more empathetic and involved in how we cover these stories -- in other words, do we embrace advocacy journalism?

These are individual choices we need to make.

I would also urge us to bear in mind a few other challenges:

- Rise above 'doom and gloom', and instead search for realistic solutions.

- Think beyond the cute and cuddly: there's more to climate change than just polar bears and penguins! It's not only sea level rise and glaciers melting.

- We need to remember our region's diversity: we have China and India at one end of the spectrum, and small island states like Kiribati and Maldives at the other…and three dozen countries in between.

- The quest for low carbon lifestyles is fine, but there are millions in our region who have always led such lifestyles and who aspire for higher living standards. What about them?

- If you agree, we are all connecting the dots. Let us do it quickly, credibly and effectively!

Finally, there's a danger that other crises can divert attention and resources from responding to the climate crisis. Tom Toles, the resident cartoonist of the *Washington Post*, said it so well a few months ago in this cartoon which has turned out to be remarkably prescient.

So…watch out!