

## **Summary Report**

### **Asia-Pacific Regional Workshop**

#### **Enhancing accountability through the media – more hype than substance**

**Co-ordinators:** Pauline Tamesis and Paul Oquist, UNDP and Margit van Ham, Transparency International

**Partner organisations:** Regional Governance Programme for Asia and the Pacific, UNDP and Transparency International

#### **Objectives of this workshop:**

- To examine in greater depth the concrete mechanisms and tools by which media and Parliaments strengthen or contribute to accountability, transparency and integrity of governance institutions and processes
- To identify and/or focus on change agents from the media and Parliamentary sectors to catalyse regional action against corruption in Asia and the Pacific

The workshop was divided into two sessions. During the first session, which was followed by a general discussion, the four panellists made presentations related to the focus issues. Following the presentations, two break out groups were formed in a second session focussing respectively on media accountability and on parliaments and accountability.

#### **A. First Session**

**Moderator: Paul Oquist (Co-ordinator, UNDP)**

##### **1) Sheila Coronel (Executive Director, Centre for Investigative Journalism, Philippines)**

Ms Coronel illustrated the crucial role of investigative reporting in awareness raising by presenting the striking results of an investigation about bribery in public works projects in the Philippines. According to this, the village captain receives on average about 3% of the overall budget of the project in bribes, the city engineers about 10%, the mayor about 7% and the legislator about 16%.

Another study entitled „Robbed“ was also presented as an illustration of the role investigative journalism can play. This study about corruption in education found high corruption in those situations where there are strong discretionary powers within the government. Of text book funds, between 20 and 65% of the funds are lost in the process between decision and delivery. Schools receive only 30 – 40% of the textbooks they are entitled for. Combined with the fact that only 7 out of 10 students go to school beyond grade VI this leads to very poor educational standards.

The studies brought facts undoubtedly showing the necessity of the following reforms:

- Transparency in procedures and policies
- Independent monitoring and pricing
- Minimisation of political intervention
- Improvement of salaries of public officials
- Encouragement of citizen's participation and minimise political intervention

Ms. Coronel also emphasised how beneficial Investigative Reporting can be for the media and society as a whole:

- It raises standards of journalism
- It sells
- It widens the scope of the freedom of the press
- It widens access to information

However the following challenges were stressed for an effective Investigative Journalism:

- The need for support for the publication of investigative reports
- The need for training for the journalist
- Getting officials accustomed to inquisitive journalism
- The need to create an audience supporting this form of journalism.

A third study suggested that the media have a strong need for self-regulation and monitoring of the press. About 1/3 of the journalists were found to have taken financial contributions from their sources of information. The ongoing crisis and the level of public outrage about graft, corruption and other crimes in the government could be very helpful in the establishment of better access-to-information laws and increased freedom of the press.

## 2) **Kunda Dixit (Panos South Asia, Nepal)**

Mr. Dixit talked about the Media in the Age of Cleptocracy. He defined newsworthy items as being characterised by one or more of the following:

- New
- Negative
- Near
- North – at least in the southern hemisphere

Particularly in Southeast Asia, where the level of corruption is high, it is a newsworthy story to be found honest. Stories about corruption can be made newsworthy again through

- utilising the full potential of the media power
- thinking locally and acting accordingly: especially in non-English/local language newspapers information about local corruption can be of higher interest.

Mr. Dixit pointed out that corruption is unsustainable and especially corruption in high places is dependent upon a high level of international aid, which is then channelled through the governmental process.

He called for a new media programme where media reporting will no longer be restricted to the doctrine of narrative neutrality but rather become multidimensional. He also suggested offering hope in writing, as one should never underestimate the power of good examples

### **3) Afamasaga Faamatala Teoleafoa (Member of Parliament, Samoa)**

Mr. Teoleafoa reflected upon Capturing the Voice of the People. He stressed that parliament is the watchdog of the government and that parliament has to be accountable itself. This includes codes of behaviour for parliamentarians as well as a disclosure of assets. He called for an increased education of the people as the only way to enhance an understanding for the rights and powers of parliament. In addition, both remuneration as well as training should be increased for members of parliament and its staff. He highlighted the effects of the committee system as a number of watchdogs of governmental actions.

### **4) Nihal Sri Ameresekere**

Mr. Ameresekere reported on the Results of the APEC Manila Meeting 29 September – 01 October 1999 where a consensus was reached in the following areas:

- Comprehensive national strategies need to be developed
- Strengthening of the judicial role and witness protection
- Enhance the procurement process
- Enhance the investment process
- Transparency and accountability in the budget process
- Code of Ethics and Sanctions need to be established
- Recruitment, promotion, and pay of staff
- Audits need to be independent
- Establish public/private partnerships
- Necessity of good corporate governance
- Top management dedication to implement anti-corruption regulations
- Accounting and auditing rules
- Business ethics and centres
- Mobilising civil society to monitor good governments
- Create a network of anti-corruption NGOs
- Conduct surveys for feedback on government actions
- Education of the public
- Media to be effective in public scrutiny
- Enable the media for investigative journalism

The Asia Development Bank will support a standing committee for regular exchange.

## 5) Discussion

A delegate from Nepal cited a number of examples of „open“ corruption in parliament and the police force in his country. A delegate from Fiji noted that it would be necessary to prevent editors of newspapers and other media to distort stories duly researched by journalists. A delegate from Bangladesh criticised the World Bank for supporting corruption in collaboration with governments. Another delegate from Bangladesh noted that TI-Bangladesh offers prizes for investigate journalists from the country, rewarding their efforts by a further intensive journalist training overseas.

The workshop adjourned split into a sub-session on media accountability and a sub-session on parliaments and accountability

## B) Second Session

### 1) Break-out session 1: Media and Accountability in Asia and the Pacific

**Moderator: Sheila Coronel (Executive Director, Centre for Investigative Journalism, Philippines) and Kunda Dixit (Panos South Asia, Nepal)**

The highlights of the discussion were:

- The crucial role of investigative journalism in constructively informing and involving the audience as well as the prerequisite for an effective journalism reporting analytically and not only aiming at scoops and sensationalism
- The great need for protection of journalist in order for them to work independently.

Recommendations:

- a) get more training for investigative journalism – not limited to English (the donors have already indicated their support to such initiatives);
- b) work on strengthening the protection of journalists
- c) review censorship laws;
- d) necessity to highlight “positive examples and initiatives” and fight cynicism through co-operation with civil society organisations and
- e) try to get greater access for civil society initiatives to electronic media.

### 2) Break-out session 2: Parliaments and Accountability in Asia and the Pacific

**Moderator: Manzoor Hasan (TI-Bangladesh)**

The discussion of the about 15 delegates brought forth the following ideas and recommendations:

- Strengthening of the committee system. This should include full control over the budget and cross party representations

- The committee should be able to set its own budget. The question of limit of spending was discussed, with some delegates mentioning control through parliament itself, through a Supreme Court, through an independent body
- The Prime Minister should not be able to control not solely nominate the committee members
- The chairman of a committee should be selected by parliament
- The chairman of a committee should always be from the opposition party/parties.
- The committee member composition should reflect the percentages in parliament
- A Code of Conduct needs to be established and enforced.
- The notion of party election spending limits, disclosure of assets of parliamentarians and conflict of interests was discussed in length, with ideas and examples brought forth from various countries. The general ineffectiveness of the rule was claimed. It was suggested to open the disclosure of assets not only to a governmental body but also to the public, e.g. via Internet. One delegate (a parliamentarian himself) argued strongly against opening his personal assets information to the general public.
- Some delegates lamented the inadequate flow of information to parliamentarians about off-the-book liabilities towards other countries
- The idea of the speaker of the house selecting committee members based on experience, aptitude or other criteria was not carried by the discussion as it leads to a regulation too lengthy not to be misused
- The idea of having other representatives in the ethics committee (e.g. members of civil society) was dismissed as it would not be a parliamentary committee any longer.

These recommendations should be passed on the Parliamentarians Union.

**Partner Organisations and Contact Information:**

Mr. Paul Oquist, Co-ordinator Email: [paul.oquist@undp.org](mailto:paul.oquist@undp.org)

Regional Governance Programme for Asia and the Pacific  
UNDP, 13<sup>th</sup> Floor, Saudi Pak Tower, 61-A, Jinnah Avenue  
P.O. Box 1051  
Islamabad, Pakistan  
Tel: 92-51 279165 to 74  
Fax: 92-51 279280 or 279083

Pauline Tamesis Email: [pauline.tamesis@undp.org](mailto:pauline.tamesis@undp.org)

Programme for Accountability and Transparency  
Management Development and Governance Division  
Bureau for Development Policy  
UNDP  
304 East 45<sup>th</sup> Street, Rm. 622  
New York, NY 10017  
Tel: 212 906 5349  
Fax: 212 906 6350

Folkard Wohlgemuth and Stan Cutzach  
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