STRATEGIES for Social Welfare

By DR KARLINA LEKSONO
Founder of Suara Ibu Peduli (Voice of Concerned Mothers), a Non-Governmental Organisation

My young colleagues, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to thank Hitachi for giving me the chance to deliver a perspective, which reflects experiences in humanitarian movements and social work to assist victims and survivors of structural injustice and violence.

Let me first touch on how Asia was once viewed by powerful economic forces that have dominating influences in the world economy and political position. In the 10 years preceding the economic crisis, the world saw Southeast Asian countries grow impressively and such rapid growth in turn attracted large amounts of investments from developed countries in the fields that were never before explored by foreign investors.

Although the rapid economic growth failed to create satisfactory wealth distribution in these countries, a great majority of the people living in these countries are, by world standards, very poor. It has created a fairly large middle class society in excess of 40 million people. This situation has brought about significant social and cultural changes in the regions. Living standards, covering means of communication, education and consumption habits improved dramatically. Manufacturing standards and engineering advancements in some fields match those of Taiwan and Korea. This has also left many people in both developed and undeveloped countries to believe that these countries including Indonesia and Malaysia, have emerged as new industrial Asian tigers. But in mid 1997, the world was shocked to see that such well developed and much relied industrialised nations experienced economic crisis and were not able to recover from the currency-induced economic problems. In the case of Indonesia, within months of the crisis, the rupiah lost 80% of its value. This was further followed by a banking crisis that induced the collapse of a large number of private firms.

There are, of course, a number of reasons for such a rapid collapse. One of the major reasons has to be associated with the unjust political system - the regime and their corruption and inclusion and practices have destroyed social, economic and political structures of society. Economic recovery in most of the Asian countries are being experienced and have, to a large extent, repositioned the qualities of life of the people in these countries. But in the case of Indonesia, the economic crisis was followed by political turmoil, which has resulted not only in violence but, most of all, the destruction of social structure with its shared values. In this forum, specific references to Indonesia, which in my opinion, suffered the worst consequences from the crisis in Asia, will be made and used as the basis of the presented paradigm.

Indonesia's challenges are truly staggering in terms of the current foreign exchange rate. In less than two years, Indonesia has dropped from a rising middle-income country to become again one of the world's poorest nations. The number of undernourished children between the ages of 1 to 5 years old has doubled from 8 million in January 1998 to nearly 17 million in January 1999. Meanwhile, the continuing unrest triggered by the combination of a collapsed economy and the ongoing struggle for political power has shifted to violent conflicts induced by deep-seeded ethnic and religious resentment. A huge number of Indonesians – mostly women and children – are now living in refugee camps around the islands of Ambon, South Sulawesi, West Kalimantan, not to mention Acheh and East Timor. In one year alone, the number of people brutally killed or massacred in many different parts of Indonesia is in excess of 3,000. The people suffering in Indonesia, is partly due to the government's failure to protect the population and partly due to the liberated political programme which resulted in structural injustice marked by vast differences in wealth, status and power. These conditions are worsened by the fact that on many occasions, military groups not only lack a determination to protect the population, but were also involved in instigating the bloody disturbances.

However, the society is neither just waiting nor suffering in silence. Beyond the conflicts and the high level maneuvering, there is another story that is equally important and, in some ways, more compelling. This is a story of how Indonesian private citizens, many of whom emerged out of the civil society, rather than the official structure, have responded to the economic, social and political crisis by organising themselves to support the reform movement. Those most affected by the political violence, seek justice. Since the

authority has been the source of many of the problems, and since ethnic, religious and social antagonism unleashed in the upheaval, the work of the support groups on one hand has involved considerable risks.

On the other hand, the high number of victims and displaced people in numerous locations and the prospect of having long-term presence of violence, as well as constant fear that violence will recur, require much more thorough and effective means of support. There are, first of all, primary principles that guide critical social humanitarian work. The belief that people have the right to fully develop their inherent human potential and to live free from the domination and exploitation by others should form the cornerstone of humanitarian and social work in an ideal society. These primary principles which are imperative to human values and cannot be compromised are translated into practice and into instrumental values such as acceptance, self-determination, participation and respect. Although helping to make the victim's lives immediately more bearable are important activities, both values imply that social humanitarian work should not be limited to providing food, clothes and medicine to the victims and casualties. Such assistance is of a short-term nature and will not in any way improve the status of the victims. They will always remain the victims. It is very important to understand that one of the goals of social humanitarian works is to contribute to the transformation of the suffering people from the status of victims to survivors. From the dis-empowered to the empowered group, the other goals are social, political and cultural transformation.

There are two effective ways to help victims to transform their status. The first is consciousness-raising and the second is empowerment. Consciousness-raising and courageous people gaining insight into their circumstances with a view to changing them. Consciousness-raising focuses on raising victims' awareness of how they have been defined and victimised to suit others' interests.

> **Do believe in your people.**

By referring to a well-known slogan associated with the feminist movement, that is, "The personal is political." Consciousness-raising involves the politicisation of people. It tries to find relationship between the humanising political culture and human misery.

Empowerment is understood as a process through which people gain greater control over their lives and their social environment. As a process, it is dialectical. At the level of individuals, it searches the connection between individual powerlessness and its structural and political sources. The search is based on the victim's own experiences as a member of one or more oppressed groups. At the level of institutions, it incorporates the life experiences, personal stories and the impact of institutions upon individuals. The link between the political and the personal is created at the practice level of empowerment base.

To rebuild self-confidence of the victims, volunteers of humanitarian work have to facilitate the voices of the victims to be heard. The humanitarian volunteers work alongside the victims to help them define their own needs to develop skills and their ability to articulate these needs to redefine their personal problems in political terms to gain understanding of the relationship between objective material conditions and subjective personal experiences. They do not speak on behalf of the victims but work as facilitators and supporters.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have just described how a social humanitarian work is carried out outside the formal social welfare system. The reason for carrying out social humanitarian practice outside the system is that the system places institutional limits on much of our humanitarian interests. Social humanitarian practice outside the system is a people-to-people movement based on unconstrained dialogue. It will contribute to the transformation of society when it could be carried out on a macro scale through coalitions with other groups with similar commitment to humanity and similar commitment to change the distorted reality of our present society. It will put constraint on every authority to personalise the social problems for the sake of the status quo. The personal has been brought up to the political again. The personal is the political.

I believe that this movement should become the alternative way for the people of Asia in facing the new global age. It is an independent movement that in due course would gain the strength to challenge the ideological hegemony of the larger society or of the authority. Young leaders of Asia, I have only a small simple request. Do believe in your people.

Thank you very much.