

Introduction

I'd like to say at the outset on behalf of myself and my fellow judges that the standard of entries for this year's Developing Asia Journalism Awards was again very high.

On balance, it was even higher than last year.

We received a total of 138 entries from no fewer than 58 entrants and from across a broad swathe of Asian developing countries. Of these, roughly one third were what we classify as being "young" Journalists (under 30 years of age) and roughly one third were from female journalists.

One of my fellow judges, Monzurul Huq, remarked on the fact that many entrants had taken the trouble to have their work translated from their native language into English so that they might enter the competition. This proves, he said, that DAJA is "not only for English language publications but is open to the wider spectrum of journalism throughout Asia."

I don't want to say too much at this stage about which entries in particular impressed us most. That might give the game away as to whom we have chosen as this year's award winners - and we want to maintain the suspense right up to the end!

Comments on Submissions

So let me talk a bit more about those areas where we feel the DAJA scheme has been a great success - and also those where we feel future entrants might widen their horizons and improve their standards a little.

Good print journalism, in my view, holds up a mirror to life which brings the image into much sharper focus than other media can. It is the writer's ability to "describe" human suffering that makes it real for us - rather than a string of images flashing across a television screen.

We all become rather blasé about watching death and destruction on TV. Yet still print journalists - such as our DAJA entrants - can stir our feelings and produce, shock, anger, and sadness that people should have to endure the deprivation of extreme poverty. Or, they can make us feel joy at the triumph of the human spirit in coping with suffering and adversity.

This is what the DAJA entrants have done. They have shone a light for us into the dark places where grinding poverty and crippling disease still lurk in so many parts of Asia. They have shown us a side of life, where exploitation, corruption, and crime still cripple the lives of so many of the region's poor.

And, they have once again reminded us that however much the development community is doing to reduce poverty and to relieve suffering, there is still a very long road to travel in this direction.

People are obviously good subjects for writers - just as they are for painters. This is clear from the fact that so many journalists opted this year to enter for the "People and Development" Category - where no fewer than 81 entries were received.

And yet, while development certainly is about people, that is not the end of the story. Development is also about policies and about philosophies.

Terrible though the problems described to us by the DAJA entrants are, the fact is that efforts are being made to reduce poverty, stop the spread of infectious disease, slow the plundering of environmental resources, fight corruption, and to counter natural disasters.

We would like to read more about these efforts in the DAJA submissions. Not to please any development agency, but to take an objective look at how effective - or ineffective - development efforts are.

The development agencies do their own "audits" And they produce reports on their own projects. But these are often cloaked in official jargon or written in an untransparent manner that renders them of little interest to the general reader.

We need the journalists to turn the spotlight on where development efforts are succeeding, and where they are failing - for example, efforts to provide education and healthcare or to stop environmental abuse and degradation.

We need to know whether infrastructure projects are seen by the people they are meant to serve as successful, or as dismal failures - "white elephants," if you like. We need to know whether people can afford these services and whether the right kinds of services are being provided.

Have the development agencies got their priorities right? Is development money being well spent - or wasted? Is development reaching the people that it is supposed to reach? Have the poverty reduction targets set by the World Bank and the ADB - and also the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations - made any noticeable difference to the life of the poor in Asia?

Conclusions

As I have said, there are any number of official reports on these subjects. But we need the journalists to bring the subject to life for us - to "tell it like it is."

The journalists need to look deeper into the root of social problems, too. As my fellow judge Yoshio Murakami said - and I quote - "there are many good stories written about injustice and misery. Some of them could have been more powerful stories had the writers moved on and pursued the causes behind such injustice and misery." I would echo that.

But let us now give credit where it is richly due - and move on to the award ceremonies.