

Martin Khor – A Crusader against the Unequal World Order

“Globalisation in its current form cannot deliver the benefits expected of it. Civil society, particularly in developing countries, must ensure that it does.”¹ wrote Martin Khor, and he remained steadfastly committed towards fighting for a more just world.

The 1970s was a time of global economic transition from the optimism of the long boom (expressed in the New International Economic Order of 1974) to recurring stagnation associated with global over-production and under-consumption. The 1980s saw the rise of the neoliberal paradigm including small government, privatisation and marketisation, trade and investment liberalisation and globalisation (and designed to protect corporate elites from the risks of global economic imbalance).

Martin was 30 and working at the Consumers’ Association of Penang in 1981 when the ‘debt trap’ was sprung; when US interest rates peaked at 20% (precipitating the debt crisis and a decade of de-development under IMF/WB ‘structural adjustment’). The debt crisis (and the ‘lost decade’) were accompanied by a global recession precipitated by Thatcher and Reagan in order to discipline organised labour in the global north and advocates for infant industry protection in the global south.

In 1984 Martin was instrumental in organising an international conference in Penang on ‘The Third World: Development and Crisis’ at which the Third World Network was created. Under Martin’s leadership TWN emerged as a powerful influence on macroeconomic thinking in low and middle income countries. This influence was mediated through TWN reporting and commentary (including for example Third World Economics and Third World Resurgence) and through policy networking in government, academia and civil society. ‘Rethinking Globalisation’ written for UNCTAD in 2000 and published as book in 2001 sets out clearly Martin’s analysis of the development challenge in the era of neoliberal globalisation.

Martin’s engagement in global health policy was heightened following the publication by the World Bank of ‘Investing in health’ in 1993. In this glossy and polished report the Bank sought to rebut criticisms of structural adjustment from public health advocates (such as David Sanders in his 1985 book, ‘The struggle for health’). In effect the Bank was arguing that structural adjustment was actually good for health. The report deployed a new (and deeply deceptive) approach to studying the cost effectiveness of various public health interventions. The method served to focus on magic bullets but discourage consideration of clean water, sanitation, housing and other environmental determinants of health. The report argued for a stratified approach to health care financing with a health insurance market place and a safety net for the poor. Health care provision was to be carried largely by the private sector.² In December 1994 Martin co-convoked a meeting of TWN and the International People’s Health Council (IPHC) in Penang to explore global health under globalisation and in particular the significance of the increasing attention being paid to global health by the World Bank. December 1994 coincided with the Marrakesh Treaty formalising the treaties of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Martin set forth a far sighted analysis of the ways in which trade liberalisation and intellectual property reform were to impact on population health.

Martin was among the foremost opponents of the creation of the WTO regarding it as a global body with a bias in favour of rich countries and against the poor countries and was actively involved in stalling the Multilateral Agreement on Investments.

¹ https://oecdobserver.org/news/archivestory.php/aid/331/We_the_People!_An_NGO_view.html

² For a more detailed critique of ‘Investing in Health’ see – Sanders, David and David Werner (1997), *Questioning the Solution: The Politics of Primary Health Care and Child Survival*.

Calling the annual UN Climate Change Conference in 2012 a climate summit of “low ambition”, Martin criticised the low commitments made by developed countries with regard to emission cuts and climate financing for developing countries. He was at the forefront in the fight for more equitable global solutions to the climate crisis and raised the inherently unequal treatment meted out to Global South in climate change negotiations. In one of his recent most works he clearly argues that - *The equity imperative is rooted in the development needs of the developing countries and in the fact that emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases over the years mostly originated in the developed countries.*³

IPHC, which was later to become one of the founding networks of the People’s Health Movement, was created at a meeting in Managua in 1991 attended by participants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, the Dominican Republic, the USA, India, Bangladesh, the West Bank and South Africa. All were leaders in community health work among disadvantaged groups, many in the struggle for liberation or for far reaching social and political (structural) change. Many of those at the Managua meeting went on to become activists within PHM (including David Sanders, Maria Hamlyn Zuniga, Mira Shiva and others), united by their practical experience in ‘the struggle for health’ in many different settings around the world and their critique of the impact on global health of transnational globalisation and capitalist imperialism.

In reaching out to IPHC Martin was deepening the links between TWN and critics of structural adjustment and its impact on health and of World Bank policies in health and leading analysts of the macroeconomic context of global health. Both IPHC and TWN were deeply involved in the planning for the first People’s Health Assembly (PHA). Martin was actively involved in the first PHA, helping prepare the analytical background papers for different themes and, in fact, conducted an intense discussion on trade, patents and health at the Assembly.

With Martin at the helm, TWN was among the founding members of PHM and till date is an affiliate organisation of PHM, closely working together. Martin was actively engaged in the functioning of PHM as he was on the PHM Steering Council until 2008. It was during this period that the second PHA was organised. Martin was also very supportive of the one of the key programmes of PHM – the Global Health Governance. His support for civil society organisations was always an important element of Martin’s commitment to global health process and continued during his time as the South Centre’s Executive Director from 2008-2018, an intergovernmental organisation of developing countries based in Geneva, Switzerland. He encouraged PHM’s annual WHO Watch and gave PHM the opportunity to engage with Member States ahead of the governing body meetings of WHO, i.e, Executive Board and World Health Assembly. He also helped position antimicrobial resistance as one of the most pressing global health priorities and involved PHM both at the global level and at the regional and national levels in positioning the issue.

In Martin, PHM has lost a comrade - a mentor and a constant support/guide. But beyond our personal loss, the world has lost a crusader, fighting against the unjust and inequitable order.

(To read more about Martin Khor and his writings, please visit [Third World Network](#))

³ Khor, Martin (2020), The Equitable Sharing of Atmospheric and Development Space: Some Critical Aspects, TWN Climate Change Series no.4