

There is a burst of activity in Asia these days, aimed at achieving a greater public understanding of science. Some — perhaps even most — Asian nations are just waking up to the need for more public appreciation of how science and technology can help national development.

Leaders in these countries argue that popularizing science encourages people to understand and co-operate with government actions on large-scale problems such as conservation, pollution, irrigation, sanitation and infectious disease. They argue that interesting the youth of a country in science increases the country's science manpower and speeds national development.

Communicators have been quick to respond to this line of thought: A month-long Asian training course for leaders in the Promotion of Public Understanding of Science, Technology and Environment (PUSTE), sponsored by Unesco and the Science Foundation of the Philippines, was held in Manila from February to March.

A seminar, "Scientists as Communicators", held in Colombo last February, attempted to sharpen the communications skills of scientists and journalists from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, and Thailand. The seminar was organized by Sri Lanka's World University Service and supported by the IDRC.

The Press Foundation of Asia, the non-profit parent organization of DEPTHnews Science Service, is considering two meetings of Asian science writers this year. The PUSTE meeting here also considered a committee's suggestion for such a gathering.

At the University of the Philippines (UP), weekly seminars attempt to link media writers with researchers whose work is sponsored jointly by the UP and the National Science Development Board (NSDB). Under co-ordinator Dr. Joventino Soriano, this NSDB-UP media linkage program has already held a four-day science writers' seminar in a mountaintop "think-tank", and a travelling seminar which rolled through villages in three provinces north of Manila in seven buses last April. Each bus carried media writers with researchers from seven separate areas of science or technology.

Participants at the seminar in Colombo felt that what is needed to bring science and technology news to the people is a regional organization that could pool and disseminate scientific knowledge throughout Asia.

Prof. P. P. G. L. Siriwardene, vice-chancellor of the University of Sri Lanka, noted that science has to be written in the vernacular to get to the people. The dissemination of scientific knowledge, he said, must be carried out "not in a haphazard manner, but as an important national venture."

Dr. Wimal Dissanayake, head of the

Bringing science to the people

Mack Laing

university's mass communications department, said the science-communicator cannot afford to patronize or "talk down" to his audience. Scientists, communicators, and audiences are equal partners in a common voyage of discovery. "Isn't this what science is all about?" he asked.

Ernest Corea, of the IDRC's Publications Division, said the mounting Asian commitment to improving the well-being of its peoples must involve the application of science and technology to the various human endeavors that, in their total, add up to human life.

He added, "If this holds true for the entire region, it follows that communication processes, as related to development, should be regionally conceived and applied."

In another development, Sri Lanka's Ministry of Education is planning to provide scholarships for science writers to obtain university science degrees. Selections will be made by a committee representing the National Science Council, the Book Development Council, Unesco National Council and Sri Lanka's Association for the Propagation of Science.

"The course is designed to develop the ability of writers to convey scientific knowledge to the layman in its most acceptable form," said Education Ministry Secretary Dr. P. Udugama. "In the first instance we will pick personnel already engaged in the profession as science teachers, as they are those who are most familiar with the needs of the student."

The Philippines, meanwhile, is now moving at full steam to spread information on science and technology to the people. In a speech read by NSDB Chairman Melecio S. Magno at the opening of the course to promote public understanding of science in Manila, President Ferdinand E. Marcos told the delegates: "We are belatedly finding out that the harnessing of

science and technology is not a mere matter of learning formulas, but a process of cultural transformation itself, a process of building toward a new and modern culture. It is in this light that I perceive the importance of promoting wide public understanding of science, technology and the environment."

Unesco's Dr. George Dontsov said there was a danger that developing countries would be left even further behind the developed world unless developing countries could get their peoples to understand science better.

Dr. Thomas G. Flores, of the Philippine Council for Agriculture and Resources Research (PCARR), described a basic communications problem: "Many times the professional writer tends to 'sensationalize' the information to get it into the media.

"So on one hand, you have the scientist who insists on scientific language; on the other, you have the popular writer who wants to simplify the information to the extent it no longer looks like the original. It is no wonder there is no love lost between the scientist and the media practitioners."

Mrs. Gloria Gatchalian, of the Science Foundation of the Philippines, noted that only 30 percent of 1972 college graduates here came from the natural, medical and engineering sciences. She said formal education was not meeting the country's need for scientists and technologists. "The answer is the enrichment and intensification of non-formal science education."

Mrs. Gatchalian said this out-of-school approach was being strengthened in the Philippines by the formation of Science Clubs, which undertake science projects. Last year (1976), she said, there were 741 clubs with 50,150 members. There is a confederation of these clubs and, since 1971, it has brought together six national Youth Science Camps, said Dr. Tomas C. Ongoco, assistant director of the Science Foundation of the Philippines. He said science campers who have gone to rural areas on projects to explain science to farmers and remote villagers have helped to conquer ignorance and superstition.

The formation of the Philippine Science High Schools, the Science Talent Search, the organization of Science Fairs and the creation of science attachés in the Philippines' foreign embassies are other moves that have promoted the public understanding of science.

This report was prepared and distributed by the Science Service of DEPTHnews, a specialized news service on science in development supported jointly by the Press Foundation of Asia and the IDRC. For more information on DEPTHnews Science Service, write P.O. Box 1843, Manila, Philippines.