

A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF RURAL INSTITUTIONS IN SRI LANKA

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The role of rural institutions in Sri Lanka has had a long history. Both formal and informal institutions played a major role in rural development, and the people participated in the establishment of law and order and day-to-day administration. The Gamsabhas, the Kanna meetings, the Dayaka Sabhas and the role of the priest can be cited as examples.

The first kind of rural institution that was established during the time of colonial rule was the Village Committee. The Village Committees were actually the successors to the Gamsabhas that existed during early times. The Irrigation Ordinance of 1856 also institutionalized the role of the cultivators in order to get together the decide on the cultivation calendar and the management of cultivation.

The 1924 Village Committee Ordinance provided for elected members to participate in rural development through the construction of village roads, markets, fairs, wells and sanitary facilities.

In 1948, the Rural Development Movement was started with the following two objectives:

- (i) To harness the enthusiasm and the efforts of rural people for the improvement of their social, economic and cultural conditions; and
- (ii) To bring the rural people into close contact and to coordinate through institutions the various governmental services available in the rural sector.

The Rural Development Societies which were established in every village were expected to organise the rural people and build a society of self-reliance. However, in the implementation of this programme the emphasis was more on government-sponsored rural development programmes like the building of roads, schools, playgrounds etc. This movement had very limited scope in the sense that it thrived only in areas where good leadership succeeded.

The Cooperative Movement is another movement which could be

traced back to 1911 and which played an important role in rural development. The early Cooperative Agricultural and Production Societies and the Credit Societies played an important role. But during World War II these societies were eclipsed as a result of the establishment of consumer cooperative societies for the purpose of food distribution.

In 1958, the Multi-Purpose Cooperative Movement replaced most of the above mentioned societies, and they became very powerful rural level institutions aimed at development. However, they have now ended up as mere trading organisations devoid of mass participation.

The production-oriented programme launched by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture resulted in the establishment of another rural-based institution, namely: the Cultivation Committees established under the Paddy Lands Act of 1958.

These Committees replaced the famous Vel Vidane system and were meant to be farmer organizations elected by the farmers themselves for the management of paddy lands in their area of operation. Nearly 5,000 Committees were set up and were given wide statutory powers which included the protection of tenants, agricultural labour, management of land and water, and the supply of inputs. As rural development change agents some of the functions of these new Committees overlapped with the responsibilities hitherto entrusted to Village Committees and Rural Development Societies. The urgent need to increase food production made the role of Cultivation Committees more important and by the 1960s with the emphasis to mobilize the farmers for food production these Committees came to be involved in an exercise of village level agricultural planning. The annual agricultural implementation programme of the Ministry of Agriculture, which was started in 1964, made use of the Cultivation Committees to prepare a Na-

tional Programme and this planning activity was carried out with much enthusiasm up to 1970.

In the year 1972, the country witnessed another change with the dissolution of the Cultivation Committees and the establishment of the Agricultural Productivity Committees (APC) and the new Cultivation Committees (CC). With the increased emphasis on agricultural productivity, land use and livestock development, it became necessary to establish, at divisional level, a farmer organisation with greater powers to tackle the problems of agriculture and to participate in agricultural planning. The Agricultural Productivity Committees thus formed had one major defect, that is, the farmer representatives were not elected but nominated by the Minister in charge. This drawback resulted in its failure as a people's organisation. However, these Committees were entrusted with enormous powers such as laying down minimum standards for productivity, protection of tenancy, writing of the Agricultural Lands Register and the development of capital works.

The concept of Agricultural Service Centres, which went along with the Agricultural Productivity Committees, should be considered an important landmark in the history of rural institutions. There were 500 such Centres established all over the country, and for the first time the farmer was assured of not only inputs but also the convenience of meeting the government officials engaged in Agriculture at those Centres.

The Divisional Development Council (DDC) which also came into being about this time was another institution aimed at the utilisation of resources, skills and knowledge for the economic development of the rural areas. Although some of these institutions were aimed at enlisting popular participation, they were unable to produce much impact and achieve their objectives.

With the political changes in 1977, the above mentioned institutions, that is, the A.P.Cs, C.Cs and DDCs were dissolved and new institutions were formulated for the purpose of rural development. 5,000 officers called Cultivation Officers, replaced the Village Cultivation Committees at the Divisional level, and the Agrarian Service Committees came to be establish-

ed under the Agrarian Services Act, No. 58 of 1979. The latter Committees had a greater number of government officers as ex-officio representatives of the Agrarian Service Committees. Their objective was to provide services to farmers. These Committees continued to be the focal point for the distribution of fertilizer, agro-chemicals and agricultural implements.

Another experiment was conducted as an FAO Project in Kurunegala District with the establishment of the Small Farmer Organisations. These were small farmer groups at Yaya level and were meant to solve the day-to-day problems of farmers without much assistance from the Centre. An attempt is being made to establish these small farmer groups throughout the country. The Gal Oya Water Management experiment gave rise to a new concept that Water Management should be brought about through a catalyst approach, i.e. through farmer representatives at Yaya level. These Yaya leaders, grouped together as farmer representatives, were entrusted to manage their own irrigation water for cultivation. This principle has been further developed by the integrated management of major irrigation systems and programmes.

A management framework for this project consisting of farmer organisations at 3-tiers had been established. They are:-

- (a) Field channel committees elected from amongst the beneficiary settlers;
- (b) Sub-Committees at the distributory channel level and the Field Channel Committees; and
- (c) Project Committees functioning under the Project Manager.

These Committees have been established and function as action-oriented groups with farmer participation.

Another village level organisation, the Gramodaya Mandalas was set up for rural development by 1978. The membership of these Mandalas, consisting of representatives of all recognized village level societies, have been given sufficient authority to associate themselves in village development and forms a link with the Pradesheeya Sabha at the Divisional level and the District Development Committees at the District level.

One could, thus, see that the principle of harnessing a multiplicity of

village level institutions for rural development has been the pattern in the rural sector during the last few decades. The reasons for the existence of a multiplicity of rural institutions, and their successes and failures may be attributed to the following:

- (a) Lack of integration between the different agencies engaged in rural development has left the rural institutions in a confused state. The portfolios of Food, Agriculture, Irrigation, Land and Forestry have been divided right down the decades in such a manner that no one programme was possible of implementation; and there was no clear-cut policy for rural development until recent times;
- (b) No one has looked into the totality of the institutional base leading to lopsided development of the Paddy Sector as against the other agricultural sectors;
- (c) There was considerable overlapping amongst various responsibilities given to rural institutions. It is common knowledge that the same people participated in one or more institutions at the village level;
- (d) In spite of the fact that there was a Ministry in charge of Rural Development, the actual implementation of rural development was performed by a number of agencies while the Rural Development Movement was kept away without powers and funds.
- (e) The tendency of the politicians to treat village level institutions as a part of their power base has led to these organisations being manipulated to suit different ends;
- (f) The latest definition of rural institutions being concerned with only one input, that is: water management, has left the other interests to be handled by other institutions and organisations. This has, no doubt, added to the confusion at the village level. Efforts for rural development have been sporadic and unplanned till recent times and this had led to the wastage of resources.
- (g) The Government officials working at the village level have failed to bring in the desired changes. Their contact with the people has been poor, and they have failed to identify the most important needs of the people

We have yet to wait for a strong rural institutional movement because we have still failed to determine the real role the people have to play in the sphere of rural development.