

# INTEGRATED RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES : PROBLEMS OF ASSESSMENT

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All the indicators are that a large rural sector, not much smaller in proportion than what it is now, will be a feature of this country for a long time to come. During the next 25 years, if not the next 50, there will be little relative change in the size of the rural and urban segments of Sri Lanka's population.

The prospect as some have warned is challenging, even frightening. It is a prospect which could have been faced with equanimity if the country had vast untapped resources of land. This as we know is not the reality; land to man is a fast dwindling ratio. If consolation is sought it can only be in the fact that some of the other countries in the region are in the same predicament.

Against this background, policies beamed at the rural sector, policies which have important implications for the rural sector, devices and institutions whose purpose is to transform rural life—all these acquire a critical significance. If it is argued that this transformation has received only a muted emphasis in the package of policies adopted by successive governments, few would be disposed today to contest such a view.

The attempt to examine the effectiveness of Integrated Rural Development (IRD) as a development strategy is therefore timely. Votaries claim that it is the only effective way of engaging in rural development. Its detractors on the other hand refuse to grant it the status of a finished technique. In the words of Ruttan, it is "an ideology in search of a methodology".<sup>1</sup> Where exactly does the truth lie, especially as it is revealed in the experience of a particular country?

This paper will not comment on Sri Lanka's IRD policy nor will it examine those projects which have been designed and implemented under this rubric. Instead it draws attention to those questions which must be answered and those

issues which must be addressed if the activity of IRD in any given country is to be meaningfully interpreted. I begin by referring to the continuing debate on IRD. This will be followed first, by a discussion of the 'form' of an IRD programme, and then by some comments on the problems of evaluation.

## The Debate

IRD is a species of rural development. As a strategy, rural development did not exist in colonial times. In the countries of this region, it began soon after independence with the belief among the new rulers that the conditions of the peasantry could be speedily improved. We shall not go into the economic and political assumptions that were made; however, it became apparent very soon that the strategy was not working. As early as the mid-fifties the newly independent countries - Sri Lanka among them - were engaging in 'evaluations' of rural development.

Understandably, poor administration was seen as the cause of failure, but before long a more fundamental reason was identified, though seldom publicly acknowledged. Rural development could not be done on the cheap. The increase of agricultural productivity, the raising of incomes and the improvements in the educational, transport and health services were far more costly than had been imagined in the first flush of independence. Expenditure here, if it was pursued, had to be at the cost of investment elsewhere. For some countries, India for one, there were other priorities - the transformation of the country into a major industrial nation. Rural development was no longer seen as the moral responsibility of an independent nation; it became a palliative, the mediation between the political importance of the peasantry and its economic marginality. Thereafter the development of the rural sector may be described as selective; favourable economic and political circumstances made for changes in some areas while others continued much as before, deriving little from, and contributing little to, the national economy.<sup>2</sup> This approach could not however be followed through in all countries. It was possible in India because the prospect of industrial transformation and the attainment of a position of global power were important enough to jettison other ob-

jectives. In other cases, Bangladesh for instance, (East Pakistan at that time) the approach promised little. The economic homogeneity of the country was such that there was little logic in the selection of some areas for development as opposed to others in terms of a national economic thrust. A strategy had to be devised for the enduring development of all rural areas without being fuelled and supported by an emerging industrial sector. IRD was the response to this need and in this region this was effectively its birth.

As is well known, the Bangladesh programme began in the district of Comilla. The institution set up for this purpose was a 3-tier system of co-operatives and the scheme encompassed a wide variety of activities. The project had an enormous back-up of governmental support, resources and personnel, including a Harvard team of analysts and planners. Few would dispute that there were spectacular initial successes. But by the time of liberation in 1971, that is within a period of seven or eight years, the cracks had already appeared and by the mid-seventies the programme had run out of steam.

The Comilla issue has never been resolved. Was it a success or a failure? If it was a success was it a one-off exercise which could not have been replicated? On the other hand if it was a failure, were 'political' factors to blame? Yet, the initial success of Comilla - apparent success as some continue to insist - induced international organizations to promote and recommend IRD as an effective approach.<sup>3</sup> Some countries adopted IRD modifying and adapting it to suit their own purposes; others made adjustments to existing programmes so as to accommodate IRD. And when the basic needs approach gained prominence and when the "poorest of the poor" became a target of development IRD incorporated these new elements into its framework.

Meanwhile the debate had continued.<sup>4</sup> Not only is there disagreement about the effectiveness of IRD; there is little unanimity about what it is. For some it is a collection of consistent and interdependent goals. To others it is essentially a device of implementation, the orchestration of effort. A third position is that it is primarily an ideology, a way of approaching the rural sector and its problems. There are of course various mixes of these emphases.

The protagonists of IRD advance various arguments in its favour. The limited resources that are available to the rural sector must be co-ordinated. This makes it possible to establish priorities and to direct resources where they are most needed - for essential activities and to the most impoverished groups. The crowning argument is that IRD allows the local community to plan its own development and monitor its own performance, even if policy is formulated at a higher level. The claim is that success is inevitable - where there is a will to make it work and where this will is translated into a systematic plan. Failures are not denied but the argument is that these occur when the will is absent and when planning is perfunctory.

The critics are many. They point out that the protagonists are themselves not agreed about what IRD really is and go on to say that this is evidence both of a lack of conceptual clarity and of the failure to develop appropriate techniques. IRD they say has yet to generate a proper body of principles. If co-ordination is presented as one such, they argue that this should be a feature of any scheme, rural development or otherwise. If vegetable cultivation is promoted, then it is only commonsense to ensure that there is the means by which the produce can be transported to the market. Co-ordination of this sort, they claim, existed even in colonial times and dismiss IRD as a grandiose name for an obvious and straight forward activity.

A second argument relates to political realities. Schemes such as Comilla it is suggested, succeeded primarily because of the back-up which they were fortunate enough to receive. When this was withdrawn, the scheme collapsed. The reason for this it would seem is that the large volume of resources which flow into such projects submerge the political differences - intra-village, inter-village and intra-district - which would operate in more normal circumstances and which resurface when the resources are withdrawn.

Related to this is another comment. It is that IRD schemes are not "integrated" so much as "controlled". Integration is merely a by-product of control. This element of control which IRD schemes are supposed to exhibit is traced to the foreign assistance that they receive and those who take this view sometimes go so far as to regard IRD as a donor concept. In this sense the claim that partici-

pation is an important feature of IRD schemes is strongly disputed. The contention is that schemes which develop from the ground upwards will have a very different character.

To sum up, it would be true to say that many of those who are critical of IRD programmes see the little difference between these projects and rural development schemes of the earlier type as instruments through which changes can be brought about in the structure of rural society. The one like the other is regarded as a palliative.

This is only the merest sketch of the debate. In the light of its experience, where would a particular country place itself? As protagonist as critic or somewhere in between? This will depend on the answers to two sets of questions and it is to these that I shall now turn.

### The Form

It is not necessary to travel through South and South-East Asia to realise that this region contains a wide variety of IRD schemes. The literature makes this abundantly clear. In what respects, though, do these schemes differ and how to do these differences give national IRD programmes their character and their particular form. Let me very briefly describe the major variables.

One of the most important of these is the Target Group. In some instances this is a geographical area, selected usually because of deprivation in relation to resources, services, investment and so on. In other instances - India is an example - the target group is a segment of the rural population often designated without resort to euphemism as the 'poorest of the poor'. The programme is expected to cover this segment across the whole country. In a few cases the entirety of the rural sector is the target - eventually if not in the short-term. This was the Bangladesh model.

A second important difference is the objective of the programme. Some schemes have a very wide sweep. It is their purpose to increase agricultural productivity; to stimulate village-level manufacture, to raise incomes through these and other means, to improve services, to set up new institutions and perhaps also to change attitudes. Others are far more limited in their scope; the satisfaction of basic needs or the increase of incomes may be their only objective. Most sche-

mes are in between.

These differences of objective can be viewed in another way. A country has a set of policies, programmes and institutions through which it addresses the welfare and the development of the rural sector. Prior to the institution of an IRD programme this would have been done both through a rural development programme and through the regular agencies of government. When the IRD programme commences some restructuring of functions takes place and this programme takes over some of the tasks previously performed by other organizations. Thus the scope of an IRD programme can also be examined in the context of the broader question: who does what in relation to the rural sector.

IRD programmes vary considerably in the matter of institutions. Some set up new ones at all levels - national, district and local. At the other end some programmes manage without new institutions at any level. In the village for instance, it may operate through an existing organization such as the Co-operative Society. Most programmes however, set up some new institutions, at one level if not all.

These institutions between them will have to perform a series of tasks - formulating policy, planning programmes, providing support, initiating training, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and so forth. There is little uniformity in the manner in which these tasks are divided between the three levels. All that can be said is that the formulation of policy is a task that is performed at the national level, but even here there are differences in the manner in which this is done. Some policies are spelt out in great detail with prescriptions that are very specific; in other instances the elaboration of this policy is done at lower levels.

In some countries, the IRD programme is the sole responsibility of the Government. In others the national programme is assisted and supported by non-governmental organizations and also by foreign agencies. This support could take many forms - finance, technical knowledge, personnel. It could be given at any of the three levels of the programme.

The institutional structure of an IRD programme - whatever form it may take - implies a corp of workers, paid and otherwise. At times this corp is a highly differentiated one with many different

roles, each with a set of tasks and duties. In these circumstances programmes often find it necessary to provide special training to those who are selected to fill these roles.

The many differences in programmes that we have noted are reflected in their fiscal arrangements. Finances as we have just noted do not come from the government alone. But more important than the source of the finance is the pattern of control and disbursement. Programmes differ in the manner in which they assign powers to each level in this respect.

This discussion should have demonstrated that a programme can take one of many different forms on every major variable. The result is that each country programme has its own particular character, its distinctive profile. The first step then in the assessment of a country's IRD experience is to identify its profile. Where does it stand in relation to target groups, objectives, institutions and so forth?

But this is not all. How did it come to have this form? What perceptions and what decisions brought this about? Were these decisions the result of a relatively free choice between options or were the imperatives such that there was little of it. If the programme has evolved through different phases we are dealing not just with one set of decisions but with a sequence which has to be similarly explained.

There is little point in narrating the story of this profile merely in organizational terms, that is, merely in terms of institutions set up, schemes devised and results achieved. The story if properly examined is more complex and goes beyond this superficial level. The form, that an IRD programme takes, derives from policy decisions which are a response to a multi-faceted problem whose core is however, quite clear. It is the difficulty or the inadvisability of spending on the 'welfare' of the rural sector when other more urgent needs are perceived to exist. Viewed more broadly, an IRD policy is therefore, a reflection of the view that a government takes of a country's circumstances, and of how it has chosen to deal with them. The study of a profile can, in consequence, be a very useful corrective to the limited, instrumental view of IRD.

The rural development activist may view this emphasis on the significance

of a profile as an academic exercise which is some what removed from his everyday concerns. Admittedly this is not of the same order as the diagnosis of why credit was not delivered on time. One investigation is however, no substitute for the other; they are both necessary exercises in the assessment of a country's IRD experience. The provision of credit is a concrete expression of the policy whose genesis and rationale the analysis of the profile should reveal. To examine an IRD programme without dealing with the profile is analogous to treating the symptoms of the disease without looking for its ultimate cause.

#### Some Problems of Evaluation

Much more than form, design and implementation are familiar as subjects of inquiry. It is on these that the evaluations of programmes usually focus - on goals set and results achieved. What are the problems of assessing these two aspects of an IRD programme?

As design is essentially a device that matches resources and objectives. The deployment of resources is done by people playing particular roles. These roles and the relationships between them thus become the elements of the structure, which in turn is a major component of the design. The roles are not limited to the 'official' segment of the programme but includes all who work for it as well as those who are reached by it.

The fulcrum on which the design rests is that people should act and behave in a particular way. Enthusiasm and creativity rather than bureaucratic restraint may be what is expected from officials. The subjects will be expected to show initiative but at the same time to work for the common good. For some roles, these requirements can be stipulated, because they are part of an official structure. In other instances those who play the roles have to be coaxed or enticed into doing so. In short, there has to be a system of rights, duties, incentives, rewards and sanctions.

What questions can be asked about the design? The most obvious is this: Why has it to respond to this particular set of objectives? What is the rationale of selection? Why are other objectives which appear to belong together with those that the programme has chosen, not being included.

There are other questions. Do the objectives meet the real needs of the target

population? Are there moral criticisms that can be made of the objectives - for example that they promote income at the expense of kin and family cohesion. Are the objectives precise enough? Some of these could have been broken down into specific goals and these may have been given numerical form. For example the programme may expect to increase the income of the poorest 10 percent by 40 percent through animal husbandry. At other points though, the quantifiable may not have been quantified. Of course there will be other objectives of the programme which cannot be expressed numerically - such as the intention to increase the sense of solidarity among the landless.

Is the design such that it makes good use of the resources or will so much produce only very little. Is it consistent and coherent, that is, do its different components mesh together satisfactorily and will it therefore operate as intended. These questions about objectives, and more most generally about the design, can be asked as will be clear, even before the programme has begun to operate.

The evaluation of performance has as its first step, the identification of the changes that have taken place as a result of the operation of the programme. This presupposes that the starting point (base line) is known and that the end-point can be identified. In relation to some objectives, as we have seen, there are problems, but for others the extent of the change can be ascertained.

Some would regard this in itself as an evaluation. Others would make it the basis of an analysis within a cost-benefit idiom. Most often however, it is necessary to explain the reason for the results - why the programme failed to achieve some or all of its objectives.

In IRD programmes as in many other types of endeavour, the explanation for poor performance can be sought at two levels - design or management. If the fault is diagnosed to be at the level of management the inference is that the design met all the demands made on it and that with good management the programme would have achieved its goals. If the fault is seen to lie with the design, the implication is that there are inconsistencies, such as those between incentives and expected behaviour, and that the programme was disposed to

failure even if fortunate enough to be well managed.

In practice it is seldom that failure is due solely to one or the other of these factors. Nor is it easy to determine the extent to which poor management and faulty design are, separately, responsible for failure. Increases of income through greater agricultural productivity may not have been realised because the marketing wing fell down on its job. Whether this is a management problem or whether it is a deficiency of design is not immediately discernible; what does happen often is that management explanations are given for inadequacies of design.

To avoid confounding the two explanations it is first necessary to be clear that the design is consistent and logical. Let us suppose that the increase of agricultural productivity is one of the objectives of an IRD programme. Incentives are offered to promote this increase. If now it is found that given the circumstances and attributes of the target population, only 20 percent found this incentive worth responding to, then it can safely be said that this is a problem of design, assuming of course that a 100 percent response was intended.

A good design is one in which assumptions and desired behaviour are realistically matched. Even in a simple one-dimensional scheme whose only purpose is to improve the income of the poorest, some assumptions will be made. The level of poverty of these people is such, it may be thought, that they will respond to any opportunity which will enable them to increase their income by 50 percent. However, this assumption may turn out to be untrue; certain trades and activities may be rejected by the target population on ideological grounds. In more complex schemes many assumptions are made. These schemes are unlikely to function as intended if pivotal assumptions turn out to be of questionable validity.

These assumptions are the foundation on which the design is developed. To ask whether they are correct is to ask who the people are for whom the IRD programme is intended. On what premises is their behaviour predicated? Why do they do what they do, not in the sense of a uniform mass who share a common culture, but in their sectional, if not individual variety. The attempts that are made to answer these questions are various: they range from the impressionistic to the systematic. It is not my purpose to discuss these except to point

out that phenomena such as rural development demand approaches which transcend traditional disciplines. Two approaches however, have been found wanting, each in its own way. In one, the obvious attributes of individuals are identified - level of education, assets owned and so on - in an attempt to understand the variety of individual response. The survey is the device used. It can provide little understanding, though, of the logic of individual behaviour. In the other, key institutions and areas of activity such as kinship, caste, and the use of land are investigated in the belief that this will reveal both the variety and the rationale of individual behaviour. Though far more revelatory than the survey this too does not quite meet the need.

The purpose of the foregoing discussion is to give some indication of what the evaluation of an IRD programme could be. If now we examine a particular country there are a series of questions that we may ask: Has there been a proper identification of results or instead has a superficial, impressionistic exercise been the substitute? If the results are clear have they led to a cost-benefit analysis and stopped there? Or else have they also led to the separation of management issues from the problems of design? Has this been founded on a comprehensive analysis of process which enables all the major elements of the programme to be effectively scrutinized?

#### Towards an Assessment

Let me get back to the IRD debate. I do so not because it is an interesting intellectual exercise, though it is that, but because the changes which some countries of the region so ferently, if somewhat ineffectively seek, rest largely on the transformation of their rural sectors. IRD is one of many routes to this goal but not all routes are open to all countries.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ruttan, V.W. (1975) Integrated rural development programmes: a special perspective. *International Development Review*, 17 (4), 9 - 16.
2. This was startely apparent during a project in the more remote parts of West Orissa a few years ago. Little change appeared to have taken place during the last 40 years.
3. FAO, for instance, organized a conference for this purpose in Colombo in October 1975.
4. See Richter I.E. (1981): *Integrated Rural Development*, A turning? Hasnat Abdul Hye (1986): *Integrated Approaches to Rural Development*.
5. For a collation of some of the Indian studies of this type, see Kamta Prasad (1985): *Planning for Poverty Alleviation*, New Delhi.
6. For an attempt at a wider viewpoint see, Shiv R. Methtra (1984), *Rural Development Policies and Programmes: 4 Sociological Perspective*, New Delhi.

The debate is not only about IRD, not only about rural development but about development itself. It is about where a country wants to go, given the circumstances in which it finds itself and the forces that it has continuously to confront.

It is not possible, I would suggest for a country to participate in this debate in any substantial sense unless it has conducted the exercise which this paper has outlined. If it does so without such a base it participates at the level of disembodied principle - hardly defensible at this point in the history of IRD.

Even if the debate is not an issue, if IRD has been chosen as the best method, the exercise is still worth IRD method, the exercise is still worth doing. It will reveal whether perceptions were well-founded, whether modifications will suffice or whether reformulation is necessary. Clearly it is not an exercise which can be undertaken with limited time, meagre resources and doubtful skills. But the scale of the investment surely warrants this expenditure of time and resources.

It is relevant to conclude with the observation that few IRDP Programmes have been subject to the assessment that is envisaged in this paper. By far the major part of the writing on IRD has been done by economists.<sup>5</sup> Many of themselves to the input-output issue, they have exhibited a narrow disciplinary orientation and have limited. From this they have gone on to comment on policy but have left many issues untouched. Others have done no better; they too have taken bites in terms of their interests and disciplines. There is little evidence that the agencies themselves have initiated comprehensive evaluation. Even Comilla has escaped this scrutiny.

To be sure, IRD is not unique in this. But after thirty years, unless it is backed by appropriate investigations, the defence of IRD whether as principle or as technique, can become mere rhetoric.