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## NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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### INTRODUCTION

The subject of Rural Development today, is receiving the attention of politicians, administrators, academics and funding agencies more than ever before. It is almost an axiom in the developing countries that the path to national development lies through Rural Development.

Rural Development is "a process of fundamental social and economic change in agrarian societies that covers all sectors".<sup>1</sup> The success of programmes and activities connected with Rural Development depends on the extent to which the over-all policy frame work of the Government is oriented to overcome the conditions and forces that have led to wide disparities between the rural poor and the urban rich. An understanding of the rural society and the interdependencies, therefore, is a pre-requisite in rural development planning.

According to a UNDP survey "the rural areas contain on the average 75% of the national population of the developing countries and 80% of the "Poverty Group" - people earning \$ 50 or less per year or whose income is one third the national average".<sup>2</sup>

The same study concludes that two basic shifts are needed in Rural Development strategy : viz.,

"Closer involvement of the local population in the full process of Rural Development Planning and implementation".

"Strong committment by Governments to redistribute to the rural poor not only resources, but also the means to permit capital accumulation".<sup>3</sup>

It must be observed that Rural Development is not a special type of Development which is unconnected with the rest of the national development strategy. It depends on a number of factors like, health, education, agricultural and industrial development processes and policies, nutrition, social

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1. UNDP Evaluation Study No. 2 Rural Development-June 1979.  
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stratification, ownership of means of production, access to productive inputs etc. Since the problems vary from region to region and from time to time the solution too should vary. Therefore, one cannot possibly prescribe a common formula as the best solution to all our rural problems. Any solution offered, depends on the degree of political acceptability as well as the responsiveness of the rural poor.

### **Rural Development after Independence**

Rural Development as a government sponsored activity was started in the early forties. In 1940, a branch was created in the Department of Commerce and Industries for rural development work. In selected villages, Rural Service Centres were established and Rural Development Officers were posted to such centres. By 1948 there were 70 such Service Centres.

After the Independence, in March 1948 a separate Department for Rural Development was created. In a memorandum submitted to the Government by the first Director of Rural Development Mr. B. F. Perera, the importance that should be attached to the rural development was stressed, and a detailed programme of how the village should be developed by forming Rural Development Societies and Womens' Welfare Societies at village Headmen's division level was drawn up. It was suggested that the members of these societies should divide themselves up into subcommittees to tackle various aspects like Agriculture, Health and Sanitation, Irrigation, Education, Social and spiritual upliftment, marketing, local industries etc.

The need to train the village level leaders, village surveys, co-ordination of effort, forming of Divisional and District consultative committees, propaganda, and the provision for additional staff were other points of importance that were highlighted in the memorandum.

Unfortunately, however, the memorandum had suggested that the village improvement be entrusted to the village elite which is another barrier to development. It says, "Men with local influence and a flair for rural development work—chairmen and members of village committees, retired and serving Korals, retired Village Headman, Registrars, School Teachers and other voluntary workers of the right type should be utilised to carry out propaganda in rural areas on the potentialities of the movement".

This top-down approach suggested and adopted from the very beginning of the movement helped only a certain section of the village viz., the well-to-do or the elite. By co-opting the so called village leaders, the poorer sections towards whom the efforts of development should have been directed, were unwittingly left out.

However, in fairness to the official rural development work in the past it must be stated that the Rural Development Societies that were created by circulars did some useful work which was beneficial to at least some sections of the society. It became a rallying point for the other governmental activities whenever the need to pass a message to the people arose, whether in the field of health and sanitation, agricultural extension work, education, cultural activities or even political propaganda.

It gave an impetus to local arts and crafts, and cottage industries developed to a considerable extent. Hidden talent was brought to the surface and prominence and encouragement was given to develop the same. Agitation by Rural Development Societies to open up schools, dispensaries, roads and construct village tanks is noteworthy. With the help of the food aid supplied by the World Food Programme of the Food and Agricultural Organization, nearly eight thousand village tanks have been renovated between 1974 and 1980, thus providing irrigation facilities to village fields.

In times of distress, floods, famines epidemics and cyclones, the members of the Rural Development Societies have done immense voluntary work to rehabilitate those who were affected.

The needlework centres started by the Rural Development Department sometime ago have now extended their activities to things like, cookery, first aid, Home gardening, flower making, toy making etc. and have helped to some extent the village girl to prepare herself to be an able housewife.

#### **New Experiment in Participatory Rural Development**

In 1978 a searching evaluation was carried out to ascertain whether the conventional lecture room type of training imparted at the Departmental Training Centres served any useful purpose in turning out village leaders.

The Department of Rural Development which was formed in March 1948 continued to move from one Ministry to another till September 1978 when the new Ministry of Rural Development was established. Its objectives were laid down as follows :

“The Ministry of Rural Development is charged with the overall responsibility of formulating the Government’s Policy on Rural Development, initiating and promoting Rural Development Programmes and ensuring their effective implementation.”<sup>4</sup>

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4. Annual Estimates of the Revenue & Expenditure of the Govt. of Sri Lanka 1982 - Head 87.

In early 1978, the then Ministry of Public Administration & Home Affairs under which the Department of Rural Development functioned, and the Academy of Administrative Studies in consultation with the UNDP and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation which was funding the Rural Development Training Programme, conducted a series of in-depth discussion workshops with some local and Indian sociologists who were attached to the UN Asian Institute in Bangkok, to determine what alternative approaches might be more appropriate. These discussions took into consideration the concern expressed by the new government of President Jayewardene on the need to mobilise Rural Youth for development in their own areas to reverse rural urban migration and to utilise village level resources.

In June, the same year His Excellency the President and the Cabinet of Ministers were informed by the Minister of Public Administration and Home Affairs of his intention to conduct a pilot experiment in training of Change Agents who would mobilise rural youth in undertaking self-reliant rural development.

The necessity for this experiment arose out of the failure of the traditional type of rural development to bring about a meaningful development in the village. The top down approach initiated in 1948 continued till 1978 (and even to this day) failed to recognise the human aspect of development and gave too much prominence to the provision of infrastructure which, of course, is undoubtedly necessary. The importance attached to overall development of the human personality was negligible. The poorest of the poor were left out. Human beings were treated merely as objects of development and the villager was thought of as a person who cannot stand on his own without outside assistance and that he need to be told what to do and what not to do.

The new approach as envisaged in the experimental programme views development "in fundamental humanistic terms, as a process of overall development of the people and their potential."<sup>5</sup> Focus is on the release and mobilisation of the creative energy of the people as the central task of development, based on the principles of self reliance and participation.

Past experience has shown that development has to come from within the people themselves and that it cannot be brought to the people. It is like taking a horse to the water. People's participation is a sine qua non in development. Passive approval by the raise of hands is not participation in the real sense. It amounts to merely getting the sanction of the people for a pre-conceived plan of action by a few individuals who may not have consulted the beneficiaries.

The new programme commenced in August 1978 with the launching of the initial training activity of the 15 core trainers who were drawn from nine (9) different disciplines like Rural Development, District Administration, Plan Implementation, Public Health, Rehabilitation work, Agrarian services, Journalism, Education and Plantation management. They were grouped into four batches and were attached to four different locations which were different from each other in physical, social and cultural aspects. The locations are : Udunuwara in the Kandy District, Minuwangoda in the Gampaha District Pinnawela (close of Avissawella) in the Colombo District, Mirissa in the Matara District.

The trainee groups lived in the above locations conducting village surveys and having discussions with villagers, investigating the problems and potential and gaining experience as Change Agents themselves.

In March, 1979 they were sent to India and Bangladesh with UNDP assistance to observe similar programmes in those countries.

After the initial training of the above core group several others were taken in and put through the same pace. However, quite a number left the programme or had to be removed as they were either incapable of making the sacrifice of giving up their comforts and living in the village or were unable to grasp the fundamental principles of the programme.

Subsequently, two batches of Rural Development Officers numbering 50 were taken in and are under training at present. The type of training is the same as given to the core group except the experience in India and Bangladesh. It is a self learning process by interacting with the villagers for a period of time.

The number of locations has increased to 24 and in many of them village level activities have commenced.

The achievements of the trainers are encouraging as well as revealing. The mode of entry into the village is quite different from the traditional approach to village situations by government officers. In the past the government officers went into the village with a certain amount of power and arrogance, treating the villagers as people who knew nothing and that the public officers knew everything. Our trainers entered the village incognito devoid of the official garb. Result was that they were able to win the confidence of the villagers in a shorter time than their counterparts who, very much conscious of their official status, enter the village in an official vehicle and keep company with the village elite.

The new approach to Rural Development which is slow in spreading, differs in many significant respects from the earlier approach.

Firstly, as opposed to the conventional approach of implementing a pre-designed plan and imposing it on the people, the new approach gives pride of place to the people themselves. They are consulted and the plans are designed by them or with their approval.

Secondly, it recognises the fact that people know what is best for themselves and that they are not mere objects of development. The development should come from within and therefore participation is necessary.

Thirdly, it is an active process in which the participants take initiatives as well as action which are stimulated by their own thinking and deliberations.

Fourthly, self reliance and participation are the cornerstones of the new approach. Instead of depending on external assistance and aid people rely on their own strength and initiative.

Finally, the new approach does not regard the rural community as a homogeneous entity. The inherent conflicts and contradictions in the village society are recognised as fundamental facts of village life.

Looked at objectively, there exist two basic groups : one, consists of the vast majority who need and will benefit from change, the other, consists of a small minority who will resist change because their interests and elitist position will be affected if change is allowed to enter the village society.

In spite of the conflict of interests between the two groups in the village society they are also mutually dependent on each other. This is because the poor are disunited and have very limited staying power in contrast with rich whose connections with the bureaucracy and the politicians place them in a position of strength from which they are able to dictate to the poor.

Due to this pitiable position, the poor are unable to take economic, social or political initiatives to improve their lot and thereby tend to be "non-innovative, non problem solving and non-experimental". Under these conditions any external assistance coming into the village will only benefit the rich.

It is at this point that the intervention of a catalyst or a change agent is necessary to break the vicious circle and set in motion a process of development by releasing the creative initiatives of the people. It is a task that both the Government officials as well as the non-governmental voluntary workers have failed to perform, because the former attempts to direct and impose

things from above and the latter merely deliver a ready made package of benefits. In either case people turn out to be passive and non appreciative. The result is that the core of the problem remains unsolved, and only a trickle-down effect is felt at the bottom.

The change agents who are initiating the new rural development movement are a different type to both the Government officials and the voluntary extension workers. They identify themselves with the people and work with them closely. Thereby they establish confidence in the villager. They go to the village as learners and not as teachers. In that way it is easier to understand the people and get them to initiate action.

As a result of the catalytic intervention of the Change Agents many new activities have got started in the village. Production and Marketing of such commodities, as betel leaves, rubber, spices, coir, milk, brassware, cadju, etc. are some of the activities that were initiated at the locations.

#### **Perspectives of Future Development**

Rural Development as mentioned earlier is not a separate type of Development that can work in a water tight compartment. It is not just another link in the long chain of national development. It is an important link because it is connected to the grass roots and is concerned with the human aspect where the beneficiaries or the recipients should be treated with due recognition and respect and not as mere objects of development.

Re-organisation of the village level societies in Sri Lanka is necessary to provide better opportunities for the rural poor to participate in development activities connected with their areas. The societies as they are today are dominated by a few individuals who belong to the upper stratum of the village society. They are found in almost every society in the village occupying a key office in every one of them. A person may be a President in one society, a Secretary in another and a Treasurer or a Committee member in the third.

In order to avoid this situation, not only should the multiplicity of village level societies be reduced but also they should be organised on a "Interest group" basis. This means that those who belong to certain trades or professions or who have common interests should be organised to form separate societies. A common forum for a group of people with divergent interests will hardly be a success, and that has been failure of our Rural Development Societies which were started with the best of intentions.

Elimination of the middle man and the money lender by indirect intervention by the state in providing marketing facilities and credit facilities to the rural poor will go a long way to improve the economic conditions in the village.

A random village survey would indicate that due to lack of credit and marketing facilities, as much as sixty per cent of the local resources are not properly utilised by the villagers and that amount constitute the surplus getting into the pockets of unscrupulous middle men and which if allowed to remain, would increase and generate further income.

Since Rural Development is total development of the rural areas, co-ordination of activities of other departments or divisions becomes necessary as all those activities are interconnected. Agriculture, Food, Irrigation, Textiles and Cottage Industries, Housing Health, Education, Transport etc., are all linked with one another.

Co-ordination is also necessary, if the people are to be benefited by the various extension services of the Government. This calls for a change of attitude of the Government Officers who should instead of being parochial in their outlook, and confining themselves to their own departments, should take a broader view from the national standpoint. They should go to the people, live with them win their confidence and should be prepared to forego some of the comforts that they enjoy in the city in order to be of greater service to the rural poor.

As long as the public officers remain aloof from the people, the latter will not take the former into their confidence. For generations they have known the officials to be making rash promises and mollicoddling them with soothing words to get over difficult situations. Sincerity in dealing with the people is essential for the establishment of a good rapport.

Free education and mass media have made the common man of today more alert than his predecessor three decades ago. What he needs is not paternalistic pampering but proper guidance in the right direction. Shown the way he will develop himself without being a burden on the State.

External assistance is necessary up to a point, but too much of it will kill the initiative and make him dependent. Political freedom we enjoy today can be meaningful only if we make the villager economically independent.

Providing every thing by the state will never make the villager independent unless alongside what is provided by the state, the villager develops the attitudinal change which will make him self reliant.

Self reliance is the most important "new value" that should be created to develop the rural areas. "The rural poor have been too long subservient to the rural rich and to the 'Officer' sent from the city."

This has resulted in sapping the initiative and vitality of the poor on the one hand and exploitation on the other, thus perpetuating the dependency relationship. It is only by rejecting soft options and resolving to be self-reliant that the poor could come out of the pitiable position that they have been in all these years under the colonial masters as well as the local counterparts.

Politicians too will have to contribute their share to bring about the attitudinal change necessary for the people to be independent. They should think more in terms of being the representatives of the people than the rulers of the people. The 'Ruler-ruled' relationship will only widen the gap between the Politicians and the people and alienate the ruled from the rulers.

"Participatory democracy is not the formal voting of leaders into power once in every five years and passive obedience in between ; it is not merely Government of the people and for the people, but also and more fundamentally 'by the people.' In the Asian context it precludes, therefore, dictatorship of the 'elite' over the masses, of the city over the countryside, and of the modern sector over the traditional, and new forms of external control which would dilute the process of democracy. Moreover, there is no room in this participatory system for power-wielding, through intelligent leadership, which is alien to the broad mass of the people and tends to strengthen its own position at the expense of the latter, nor is there a place for the unaccountable and unresponsive bureaucrat who considers it beneath him to have any interaction with the masses."<sup>6</sup>

It is, therefore, evident that any attempt to develop the rural areas must be preceded by changes of national policy. The policy of the Government to decentralise the administration and to delegate certain powers to the District Development Councils is commendable and will have salutary effects in the development of rural areas, as political as well as economic power has to be held by the people if development is to be in the interests of the people.

"People", in the words of the Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, "are the best creators and defenders of their own human rights-including the right to eat. Freedom is essential to development and not just a product of it. But freedom does not mean, and must not be allowed to mean, the freedom of the Rich and the Clever to exploit the Poor and the Ignorant."<sup>7</sup>

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6. Haque, Mehta, Rahaman & Wignaraja - "Towards a Theory of Rural Development" - Development Dialogue 1977 : 2

7. Nyerere, Julius K. - "On Rural Development "

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