

# THE PROJECT

## PROGRESS AND EVOLUTION OF THE PROJECT

### Introduction

The Matara IRDP is now on its third phase, each successive phase having been subject to rigorous evaluation leading to substantive change in orientation and content.

### Phase I, 1979 - 84

The Matara IRDP was launched in 1979, in line with the Government of Sri Lanka's policy for rural development. The first phase of the project undertook a series of activities in different sectors. Since there was no clear cut national strategy for rural development, this was planned as a multisectoral investment programme in line with the World Bank funded Kurunegala IRDP.

Activities were selected to enhance already on-going efforts of the line departments and to fill in the visible gaps. Some of the notable activities were: the construction of a District Agricultural Training Centre; establishment of 3 plant nurseries, a hatchery and the introduction of the Training and Visiting system; construction and renovation of factories and Collection centres for tea small holders; establishment of a boatyard and ice plant; rural electrification schemes; 1319 acres of forest cover and training of women for income generating activities and training of volunteer health workers and the establishment of polyclinics. Road works and rehabilitation of minor tanks too were undertaken.

Seen in retrospect, activities of Phase I were selected in a somewhat ad-hoc manner with limited analysis of sectoral, let alone cross sectoral problems and regardless of their inter-relationship.

The total cost of the Phase I was Rs 77 million. SIDA granted SEK 18.2 million (Rs 73 mn) to meet this cost.

### Evaluation of Phase I

The external evaluation conducted in May 1982 was a critical one. Its terms of references were guided specifically by SIDA's newly formulated Strategy for Rural Development, in which light all Phase I activities were reviewed. Ten project components were studied and assessed. The findings were that the set of problems addressed by the IRDD were the correct ones but that the activities did not achieve all the planned impacts and suffered from inadequate attention to problem diagnosis and analysis. Most had mixed results.

The most significant finding was that the poor were not always the beneficiaries of the programme. Some components though well conceived had however, in actual implementation veered away from benefitting the intended target group. Infrastructure improvements, it was revealed, least benefitted the poor. The Evaluation Mission was also highly critical of the fact that little attempt had been made to involve target groups in the planning and implementation of activities. The lesson to be learnt was that the activities had to be designed specifically with the target group in mind. Thus, Phase I was a useful learning experience for the project office, Matara as well as for the others involved.

### Phase II, 1984-88

The initial project proposals for phase II, to start in 1983, were drawn up in the space of about three weeks immediately prior to the visit by the Appraisal Mission in August 1982. This Mission was reluctant to accept the greater part of the proposed programme which they regarded as being little more than an extension of the same principles which had been adopted in Phase I. As a result the Mission entered into protracted negotiations with the RDD and Project Office staff before arriving at a commonly agreed set of new proposals, in keeping with the criteria contained in SIDA's Strategy for Rural Development which emphasises beneficiary participation and a target group approach.



## Evaluation of Phase II

The external evaluation of Phase II, held in May 1987, recognised the considerable advances which had been made in reorientating the project. Nevertheless it was still critical on a number of issues. At the same time the Evaluation Mission gave due cognisance to the fact that conditions in Matara District are not always conducive to the easy operationalisation of SIDA's Strategy for Rural Development. A number of particular problems are worth pursuing a little further at this point.

### Target group definition and identification

The use of food stamp receipt as an indicator of poverty is clearly unsatisfactory but represents the only indicator immediately available which allows the specification of individual households. However, in Matara District food stamp recipients account for nearly 60% of the total population, or about 72,250 households, which is an unrealistic target for MIRDP - especially if the goal of people's participation is to be pursued.

### Scale of the MIRDP

The project is small in terms of annual expenditure: in 1987 this was about equivalent to the Decentralised Budget and District Development Council Budget combined. One implication of this is that the activities of other agencies, including the normal work of line departments, may undermine the achievements of the MIRDP, especially in terms of target group benefits. This places a very considerable burden on the MIRDP office to attempt to reorientate the policies of those other agencies.

### Target group structures and locations

The heterogeneity of human and environmental conditions in Matara District, from the closely settled coastal belt through the highly diverse middle zone to the tea-producing and estate-dominated hills of the north, together with an absence of clearly defined concentrations of poverty groups, constrain the accurate targeting of projects. The necessity to disperse project inputs and

to coordinate the activities of multiple agencies over widely scattered locations represents a severe constraint on the MIRDP.

### Limited unutilised resources

At an estimated 32% the unemployment rate in the district is extremely high, especially among young people. Although absolute landlessness is relatively low - 80-85% of households are described as agricultural operators - but the size of holding for the majority is inadequate to support the household so that additional income must be sought through wage labour. In addition, virtually all available land is already cultivated so that the opportunity for creating further employment in agriculture is negligible. Industrial production in the district is small and there are neither resources nor comparative advantages, which might encourage further industrial growth. Overall the creation of new employment opportunities, whether self employment or wage employment, is severely constrained.

In the light of these problems it is not surprising that the Evaluation Mission expressed its disappointment with progress in certain aspects of the project. In particular questions were raised about the level of problem analysis, the rigour of target group identification, the degree and sustainability of people's participation, with especial emphasis on women's participation, the level of employment creation and the extent to which cooperating agencies had been induced to adopt a target group approach.

The Mission also felt that the MIRDP Project Office had received insufficient support from Colombo in the difficult task of operationalising SIDA's strategy. At the same time, however, the Mission acknowledged the very positive achievements of the MIRDP in reaching target groups and in mobilising popular participation. In this respect the Resident Estate Labour Project and the Coastal Belt and Backward Areas Development Programmes were felt to be of particular importance. The outcome of the evaluation was that the Mission had sufficient confidence in the MIRDP to recom-

mend its extension into a third phase.

## PHASE III 1988-92

Project proposals for Phase III of the MIRDP were scrutinised by an Appraisal Mission in February 1988. Subject to minor modifications, the recommendations of the Mission were positive.

A clear distinction has been made between those project activities which are "demand-orientated" (i.e. focused on improving the capacity of target groups to shape the services which they receive and the way in which they receive them) and those which are "supply-orientated" (i.e. focused on the delivery of services and material support). The general agreement was that the former should be expanded while the latter should be orientated towards meeting the demands created through participatory development activities.

In Phase III the focus on problem villages and communities as a means of project targeting is intensified. Of some 712 villages and hamlets in the district, 235 are identified as disadvantaged and hence as potential targets. In selecting project communities, particular attention is paid to village-expansion scheme areas, socially or physically isolated communities, the remoter estate-dominated hill areas of the North, the drought-prone East and the coastal fishing and coir-working belt. As in Phase II particular attention is directed towards estate labour, both resident and now, non-resident.

Project activities have been grouped under four major programmes/activities:

1. Intensive village development programme: the main thrust of the participatory, target-group approach
2. Extensive village development programme: a broader based programme aimed at the reorientation of Rural Development Societies towards target-group and participatory activities
3. Employment and Income generating programme
4. Social and Economic Infrastructure

programme: a multi-sectoral programme including health, education, estate-labour welfare and transport in backward areas.

An expenditure of about Rs.40-45 million per annum on this phase of the project is envisaged.

### **MATARA IRDP IN RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT**

In its nine years of operation the MIRDP has evolved from a non-focused, line-department dominated shopping list of infrastructural investments over which the project office had little more than budgetary control, into a genuinely poverty-focused, coherent package of activities incorporating a substantive element of people's participation by intended beneficiaries, over which the project office exercises decisive control—even to the extent, in some cases, of direct responsibility for implementation.

The transition has not been easy. In its task of learning and operationalising new concepts in rural development planning the project office has often been isolated, deprived of support from higher bodies. Only in the past year or so have specific policy guidelines for IRD and rules for the investigation, design, presentation and monitoring of IRD project components been made available through the Regional Development Division.

Through trial and error MIRDP has arrived at its own unique response to the problems of target-groups and people's participation appropriate to conditions in Matara District. The solution is far from perfect, but a degree of flexibility in the current activities allow for fine tuning as experience is gained. What is unpredictable, however, is the extent to which the present political situation in the district will allow the MIRDP to stay on course. The range of local implementation agencies open to the project has already narrowed and new avenues must be explored, perhaps relying more on the people's own initiatives, but inevitably placing more of a burden on the Project Office.