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GOVERNMENT INITIATED RURAL INSTITUTIONS

During the colonial era the Government's involvement in rural development activities at the village level was restricted. The colonial structure of administration was operated largely for the enforcement of law and order, revenue collection and a few welfare services. The village headman who was the only powerful grass-root level agent of the formal administrative machinery could not play the role of a people's representative or transfer any power to villages. He was closely tied to a rigid and highly centralized management which was under the control

of provincial level Government Agents. Thus the rural population was by and large left out of the policy making and implementation of whatever government sponsored activities were initiated in rural areas.

During the 1930s certain changes regarding allocation of public resources for rural development had taken place when the Sri Lankan members of the State Council began to be heard and influence the colonial government regarding measures for rural development on behalf of a neglected

rural population. One of the key achievements during this period was the allocation of a considerable proportion of Government funds for construction of irrigation works and agricultural development in the rural sector.

Although these changes continued to occur at the level of the state legislature, upto independence in 1948, it did not mean that similar changes were taking place at the village level. The lot of the hapless rural peasant remained basically unchanged. In effect a few urban elites took over the power being transferred using the neglected rural masses as a strong weapon against the colonial administration for the establishment of their own power base. But

they had little awareness of the real problems of rural development. However, following independence Sri Lanka's national governments, in response to several deeper level social and political changes, began to concentrate more on rural development and allocated more and more public funds to implement programmes for the purported goal of upliftment of poor people in rural areas.

The role of the village headman became less and less important with the increase of delivery services and disbursement of public funds in the rural sector through government agencies controlled from the centre in Colombo. After independence Rural development became an important strategy for the political parties vying for power. It was therefore natural that post-independent governments focussed greater attention on the rural sector. This resulted in an intensification in the delivering of welfare facilities and public investment through an extension of the public services and government subsidies to the rural population. This trend strengthened the departmentalisation of formal functions related to rural development. Some of these departments were linked directly to the existing central government's administrative machinery; while others functioned as departments of various ministries in the provinces. This situation led to a certain degree of overlap and conflict of interests among these government agencies whose objective was to deliver the patronage of the government in power, while they lacked a proper understanding and direction covering the real needs of the rural people. This situation has in some ways continued right up to the present where the demarcation of functions and the efficient functioning of various government led rural institutions is difficult with their objectives and activities not clearly defined, lack of coordination duplication of work and conflicts of interests. The Chart above shows the main institutions and

ministries involved in rural development.

Administrative System Changes after Independence

There is no doubt that the administrative structures of the country have undergone significant changes since independence and that these changes have had a deep impact on the rural sector. As we observed, before independence the administrative structures were designed to serve the colonial presence and its objectives of maintaining law and order and a revenue collecting bureaucracy while extracting and transporting the surplus of the colonised country to the 'mother' country. The highest echelons of the administration were controlled by 'loyal' Civil Servants, most of them European; but in order to keep a check on the lower ranking non-European officers, highly codified regulations in the form of administrative and financial regulations were introduced. This situation resulted in restricting local initiative and led to a formal tightness in the bureaucracy, and it was this bureaucratic apparatus that the newly independent country inherited in 1948.

Independence in Sri Lanka had been achieved without either mass mobilisation or armed struggle, and the inheritors of independence were those who had not seriously challenged the British and were in a sense a creation of the colonial presence. But after independence internal changes began to surface strongly, which challenged the local elites. As is well recognised, one significant change was the General Election of 1956, when forces purporting to represent the peasants, workers, monks, school teachers and ayurvedic physicians obtained a sweeping electoral victory. The significance of this landmark is that, ever since, all major political parties in the country were compelled to mould their images and strategies taking close account of these social forces. Viewing

these changes in retrospect, in 1976 Susantha Goonatilake, maintained in a paper in the SLIDA journal 'Administrator' that "although the changes in 1956 and subsequently can be seen as a shift of power from those allied to the plantation sector and associated activities to a more broader based group, one should differentiate the propaganda of the victors of 1956, from the actual mechanics of social change. Thus, although the "Five-fold Forces" would indicate that the peasantry was represented in the shift, in actual fact, it was the richer and more powerful elements in the rural areas that formed support for the changes in 1956 and continue to provide support for the major parties since then. It is necessary to look more closely at some aspects of the five-fold coalition". It became apparent that in the rural sector the four leading social and economic elements were the monks, school teachers, ayurvedic physicians and the more affluent farmers. These members of the rural middle class together with the traders in these areas were largely part of the middle-rung land-lord class and often had control over the means of (largely petty) production in the rural sector. Therefore the changes in 1956 are to be seen as a partial shift of power from a class tied to (and created by) the colonial presence to one closely allied with the village based petty bourgeoisie.

The shift of power to these groups after 1956 also led to a redistribution of income from the urban to the rural areas and though the main beneficiaries of the shift has been the rural middle classes, those lower down have also benefitted, though not to the same degree. Over the years, as a result of these shifts of power, we witness a trend where many from these new groups whose social origins were with the petiti bourgeoisie kept rising to prominence in the country and reaching big bourgeoisie status. Another significant trend was that the learned professions and the higher administra-

tive positions which were hitherto manned by those whose families were associated with the plantation industry were having to let in increasing numbers of entrants from the new strata. Over the next twenty years, after these changes were initiated, whether it was the administrative service or the professions like engineering and medicine, or the teaching profession the sons and daughters of this rural petit bourgeoisie moved into a dominant position.

While these shifts occurred at the national level, there were also deep changes occurring at the village level. The rapid spread of education and expansion of mass communications and the social services and the greater access to these facilities at rural level meant that rural aspirations and consciousness were being raised to the level of those in the towns. At the village level itself, the traditional village overlordship of richer peasants and traders in association with government officials tended to change somewhat. It is seen that politicisation of the village - specially since the 1960 - has resulted often in various village level entrepreneurial groups using politics as a form of advancement and entry into the village ruling groups.

These changes that kept occurring over the 1950's and 60's no doubt made a deep impression on the administrative structures as well. The bureaucracy, especially its upper rungs, were subject to constant attack, even on public platforms by the new MPs soon after the changes in 1956. A major change in these attacks was that the bureaucracy was not responsive to the changes that were taking place. From the late 1950's there was therefore a gradual intrusion of political factors into the bureaucracy. By early 1961 the lower rung members of the bureaucracy were being appointed under political pressure and by the late 1960's political appointees had en-

tered the middle rung positions. The spate of political appointments from top to bottom were regarded as horizontal pressures being exerted by society on the bureaucracy and the bureaucratic structure. Meanwhile, the bureaucratic structure itself changed due to other pressures from within the bureaucracy itself, particularly from the lower cadres, and these were described as vertical pressures. The introduction of the 'political authority' system in district administration in 1973 was the high point of the political pressures. The political authority, was generally a leading M.P of the government in power. This politicisation soon extended to intermediate and village level appointments such as the governing boards of Cooperatives, Cultivation Committees, Agricultural Productivity Committees etc.

The emergence of the 'decentralised budget' resulted in a degree of responsiveness to local development demands and facilitated work in the provinces; while to some extent popular participation in decision making in development increased. But, it was observed that political participation even in its limited form was being restricted to those closely allied to the government in power, and left out large sections of the population from the participation process.

Examining the inter-relationships between peasants and officials, in 1976 Susila Ranaweera in a paper in the "Economic Review" indicated that at the rural level there existed a coalition of interests between the dominant groups in the village, the government officials and the political appointees. Ranaweera's study found that perceptions of village level personnel fitted well into this coalition. For example generally government officials, political appointees and the dominant groups were viewed by sections of the dominated as being good to each

other, at the expense of the dominated. Social interaction among these three groups, Ranaweera has shown, tended to view each other favourably in contrast to those with the larger population. Thus at the village level, there was a tendency for the official bureaucracy, the dominant economic groups and the political appointees to have preemptive access to inputs to the village. Consumption items like hard-to-get maldivian fish, milk powder etc., which were distributed by the Cooperatives were often shared out by this group through informal networks of distribution. Likewise access to farm inputs including credit was disproportionately shared among these groups.

The village continued to be at the end of the administrative 'delivery system' and at the village level were best seen the main features of the socio-economic changes that took place over the last 30 years. The changes in the formal administrative system, as we saw, were brought about through specific pressure groups. These new groups had earlier been without power because of the alliance between the traditional rural elite and the colonial bureaucracy, but with the changes they entered the political arena and their influence in the rural areas kept increasing. The MP's gained more and more formal power in the district administration at the expense of the officials. More benefits from the state began to be channelled to rural areas through various agencies and the new groups and people in these areas increasingly identified themselves with the ruling political party in order to obtain access to these benefits and also personal favours of political leaders. The village institutions which served as intermediaries between the government services and the people in these areas also came under this political influence. A good example was the village cooperative.

Co-operative Movement

The co-operatives have been long standing formal organisations, established in Sri Lanka in the early 20th century to promote participatory development at the rural level as well as service the needs of the rural sector. In this country the Movement appears to have grown out of the need to alleviate the problems of rural indebtedness at the turn of this century. Its beginnings could be traced back to 1911 when Co-operative Agricultural and Production Societies and the Credit Societies began to gain ground. The next phase of this Movement began with the onset of the Second World War, when the original functions of these societies were extended to food production and retail distribution and were eclipsed by the consumer Co-operative Societies. In 1957, following a government policy decision, these were replaced by the Multi Purpose Co-operative Societies and were intended to become powerful rural development institutions. But over the years it was realised that the very basis of co-operation, popular participation, was lacking in many of these societies. Various measures were taken to revive the participatory aspect and in 1971 a major re-organisation was attempted with a view to creating more viable co-operative organisations by a process of amalgamation. The popular participatory element was effected when the government decided to have a nominated majority on the Board of Directors of each MPCS. The rationale behind the appointment of 9 of the 15 members was that government policy could thereby be better implemented, particularly as economic activities in a developing community like Sri Lanka had to be induced by the government. This particular composition of the board led to conflicting objectives and allegiances among Board members. Many of the members of these Co-operatives did not possess the necessary

leadership to distinguish between the corporate objectives and the Society and parochial demands. It was apparent that ultimately the government, which started through necessity as a trustee and guardian of the Co-operatives had ended up in firm control over what was intended to be a voluntary movement, with co-operative societies becoming virtually agencies for carrying out government policies. Active participation of members so essential for co-operation was therefore not freely forthcoming. Latterly they have tended to emphasise the trading aspects of their organisations and become distributory outlets for essential food items at the cost of the active participation of their members.

Rural Development Societies

The Rural Development Societies (RDS) were the main rural institutions initiated by the government after 1947 and these (set up in nearly every village) were expected to organise the rural people and build a self reliant society. The RDS were also expected to bring rural people into closer contact and coordinate the delivery systems of the various other institutions in the village. From the early stages of their functioning there were conflicts with departments which wanted to maintain their own identity rather than work together with the RDS. These societies became even less effective with the establishment of new institutions such as the Divisional Development Councils (DDC) and the political authorities which exerted strong influence over these same activities. The scope of the RDS was therefore limited and could produce results only when its leadership was very strong. Generally, however, these societies became heavily dependent on government support and since their responsibilities were not clearly demarcated they were not able to fulfil their original objectives.

Cultivation Committees

Cultivation Committees were another rural institution that played an important role in rural development, particularly in the 1960's with the urgent need to increase food production. However, there was an overlap in some of the functions of these committees with those of the Rural Development Societies. By 1972 these Cultivation Committees were replaced by Agricultural Productivity Committees (APC) and new Cultivation Committees. Although these committees were entrusted with wide powers the popular element was lacking in them as the farmer representatives were nominated by the Minister. Along with the APCs came the Agricultural Services Centres which were established countrywide to provide farm inputs to the rural people.

Gramodaya Mandalas

After 1977 new institutions replaced the Agricultural Production Committees, the Cultivation Committee and the Development Divisional Councils (DDCs). A recent village level organisation of note is the Gramodaya Mandalaya set up in 1981 as an institution to promote rural development. These are linked to Pradesheeya Sabhas at the Divisional level and District Development Councils at the District level. Their membership consists of all recognised village level representatives. Here once again the principle of co-ordinating the work of the various village level institutions is being attempted. (See Box on page 13).

There is no doubt that there is a large amount of overlap among the responsibilities of the rural institutions. Furthermore, although the function of Rural Development has been assigned to a specific Ministry its role has remained marginal while numerous

other agencies and government initiated institutions performed the role of rural development. Also, increasing departmentalisation and the expansion of bureaucratic functions in rural institutions has reduced the level of enthusiasm of rural people in the work of such institutions. Another notable feature is that parochial politics plays an important role in these institutions, while the tendency for politicians to treat village level institutions as part of their base has also reduced the effectiveness of these organisations.

These examples clearly illustrate that involvement and active participation of the rural people in the institutions intended to serve them is fundamental to the success of rural development. The importance of this principle is well established, but instances of where rural people have been able to effectively participate in these institutions ostensibly set up for their benefit are relatively rare.

It does not mean, however, that there have been only negative tendencies in these attempts at development through government initiated rural institutions. Over the last decade many new projects have been initiated by government on a planned basis, with a view to developing the rural areas. Among such major schemes, coordinated as projects at various levels, are the Mahaweli Development Project, the Rural Housing, Health and Education Programmes, the Integrated Rural Development Programme and other Marketing, Credit and Extension Programmes. These have invariably involved people both at rural and urban level with specific government institutions. Apart from these more prominent projects there have also been various approaches to popular participation which has involved re-organisation of traditional institutional structures. The evolution and development of such village level institutions and the issues that have arisen in this process are discussed in the papers that follow.

S.S.A.L.Siriwardene