

Rethinking rural development

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The rural economy, including agriculture, has remained the mainstay in the countries of Asia-Pacific region, in terms of both contribution to the national GDP and labour absorption. However, despite being a priority agenda of the national governments as well as the main destination of international aid donors over the past few decades, the achievements of rural development and poverty alleviation programmes have yet to make a meaningful headway in several countries, including Bangladesh. It is indeed a matter of concern that despite consistent high growth in several countries in Asia and the Pacific region, it still holds over 825 million people below poverty line.

In the 1970s, the concept of Integrated Rural Development (IRD) earned tremendous prominence due to the bitter experience of the failure of single sectoral approach in the 1960s. Several Asian countries initiated rural development programmes of various kinds and adopted various approaches in planning and implementation. It was realised that promotion and success of such IRD programmes can best be facilitated, at the regional level, by exchanging experiences and knowledge among the countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Accordingly, CIRDAP was established in 1979 as a regional, inter-governmental and autonomous institution at the initiative of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. The main objectives were set as to (i) assist national action and promote regional cooperation in the field of IRD, (ii) act as a servicing institution, (iii) encourage joint and collaborative activities for its member countries; and (iv) promote poverty alleviation measures in CIRDAP Member Countries (CMCs) through people's participation in the development process.

The IRD concept could not gain the expected momentum, mainly due to the poor performance by the national governments and IRD institutions. Hence, several new players such as I/NGOs, micro-finance institutions, civil societies and private consulting firms emerged in rural development (RD) and poverty alleviation (PA) during the successive decades. Sizable donor resources were channelled through the new actors, into the RD and PA efforts and activities. Indeed, they have done a good job to generate economic opportunities at the micro level and bring out several socio-economic issues of common concern to the forefront. In Bangladesh for example, the progress made by Grameen Bank, BRAC, ASA etc. in generating self-employment opportunities to poor families, mainly women, is simply a marvellous achievement. However, their efforts are not always sequenced along with the respective government agencies to play a complementary role, nor a coordinating mechanism has been developed at local, national and donors' level to synergise the achievements. Similarly, the core issue of strengthening and energising the government institutions largely remained unattended to. As a result, the capacity of the state to address the important issues of broad based economic growth and sustainable development has further been weakened. Similarly, the inter-governmental organisations like CIRDAP also have to struggle to find its niche of intervention and compete with market-led institutions for resources and opportunities.

In fact, the coverage of the programme for agrarian reform, income generation and poverty alleviation are in the rural areas, covering landless, small and marginal farmers and vulnerable groups; it is usually taken for granted that the issues of rural development are already addressed. On the contrary, to make these efforts participatory and sustainable, we need rural development, which may include devolution of power, development of inclusive democratic institutions, capacity building of the poor, social and economic infrastructure development, productivity development and market linkages. Let us mention some of the emerging issues of rural development.

Mainstreaming rural development issue: Over the last several decades, rural development and poverty alleviation have continued to remain the main policy agenda, and therefore the main recipient of the annual budget as well as the main destination of international support, in almost all countries of Asia-Pacific region. In spite of the sizable budget allocations, from governments as well as donors, no significant achievements have appeared in reducing poverty, or enhancing self-reliant capacity of the countries to reduce poverty on their own. The failure seems to be on the articulation of the rural development policies in the changing context as well as developing and building capacity of local governance to regulate, coordinate and sustain the development process at the local level. Increasingly, rural development (RD) is interpreted and understood as poverty alleviation (PA) programmes and the existing institutional and policy framework of RD is weakened by I/NGOs and donors through their PA activities.

Widening gap: The present state of development in the countries of Asia-Pacific region reflects the uneven socio-economic impact across countries as well as between the rural and urban areas. Impressive gains have been achieved in many countries, but these have not been shared equitably by different socio-economic groups or by geographic regions. Such diversity in the development experience, both among and within countries, reflects that the poor and the vulnerable groups particularly in the rural areas have been receiving disproportionately smaller shares of the benefits of development while often bearing the major burden of the associated costs. This is evident in higher incidence of poverty in the rural areas and the growing rate of rural-urban migration to seek economic opportunities.

Socio-cultural concern: There are increasing evidences across the countries that ethnic and indigenous communities and tribal groups are marginalised in the development process. The Human Development Report 2004 of UNDP has emphasised on this issue with hard facts and glaring examples. Similarly, the issues and concerns of women, children and elderly citizens are well documented but not adequately addressed. Hence, there is a need to go beyond the economic perspective, to take explicit account of the socio-cultural concerns and focus more on poverty at the grassroots level. It is seen in a number of countries that unequal distribution of resources, opportunities and participation across communities and geographic regions lead to social tension and conflict, which is a threat to national and international security.

Policy development: The RD and PA programmes are implemented by several agencies of government, donors, I/NGOs civil societies and private sectors. Hence, there is a problem of holistic understanding of achievements and issues of multi-sectoral policies. Moreover, with the emergence of competent knowledge development and training institutions in the private sector and their increasing use by the donors, the competence of the government supported policy monitoring and knowledge development institutions have further weakened. But the private sector has limitations to monitor public policies, understand institutional problems and exert influence on policy development. So, time has come to consider again, how the state institutions could be strengthened to become more professional, transparent and socially responsive. For example, the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD), Comilla could be developed as a focal point for knowledge generation for policy development and training for RD functionaries for policy implementation.

CIRDAP effort: Over the past 26 years, CIRDAP has been working in CMCs of Asia-Pacific region in the areas of research, focussing on understanding the dynamics of rural development process; training for capacity building and human resource development; pilot testing of rural development models and development of information technology, publication and dissemination of knowledge. Till now CIRDAP has implemented 289 projects, of which 80 are research, 38 are pilot projects, 134 are training and 37 are ICD projects. These projects cover several areas such as poverty alleviation, gender, institutional and infrastructural development, agrarian development, participatory approaches, GO-NGO collaboration, local resource mobilisation, micro-credit, GIS, M&E mechanism, environment and natural resource development and food security.

CIRDAP is a inter-governmental organisation having three policy level bodies represented by the top officials and policy makers of rural development in CMCs. The Technical Committee (TC), which is a professional body of CIRDAP, is represented by the heads of CIRDAP Link Institutions, which are the national level rural development institutions or departments. The Executive Committee (EC), which provides policy guidelines, is represented by the Secretaries of the Ministries related to RD, and the Governing Council (GC), represented by the Ministers in charge of rural development in CMCs, to provide the political leadership in voicing the agenda of rural development and poverty alleviation at national and regional level. The organisation is aiming at expanding the role of these policy bodies to be an important regional forum for experience exchange, policy dialogue and regional cooperation in RD and PA initiatives.

As the RD and PA policies and programmes are multi-sectoral and cross-cutting in nature, lack of holistic understanding of achievements and issues for policy development has been a matter of concern. Hence, the organisation is proposing to develop a comprehensive mechanism for knowledge generation, policy coordination and political support at national and regional level. Accordingly, it is proposing its Link Institutions to be designated as the focal institution for knowledge development of the progress and issues of RD and PA policies and the achievements of MDGs at the national level. This knowledge will be reviewed by the National Coordination

Committee (NCC) to be chaired by the Secretary of Ministry relating to RD and will be represented by all relevant agencies.

The next Executive Committee and Governing Council meetings of CIRDAP are going to be held in Dhaka from 29 September to 3 October 2005. These meetings will be participated by the secretaries and ministers of CMCs, who are in charge of rural development, and a number of observers from international donor agencies. It is expected that during the meetings, a number of far-reaching policy proposals will be discussed and endorsed to make the organisation a dynamic servicing centre for RD and PA at the regional level.

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