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Short Article

Repackaging Participatory Approach as an Option for Rural Development?

The fight against poverty has been relentless since the UN announced eradicating poverty and hunger as the first goal of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). But still, in Asia and the Pacific there is an average of 33.8 per cent rural people living under the poverty line and an average of 16.5 per cent proportion of population living below \$1 a day. It was hoped that a participatory approach would hold the key in the fight against poverty, through involving people at a grassroots level and not only improving their welfare but also their social and cultural life (Alamgir, 1989). Yet over the years, it turns out that the results are not as bright as expected.

Participatory Action and People's Participation (PPP) was first designed to help the poorest in rural areas to benefit from rural development programmes. It was based on six 'essential elements': (1) grassroots groups and associations, (2) group organizers and group promoters, male and female, (3) provision of inputs and services to the target groups, (4) micro-level planning, (5) participatory action research, and (6) field level workshops. PPP has been promoted since the 70s and carried out by many countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. The first three countries mentioned were considered as FAO's pilot projects for the Small Farmers Development Programme (SFDP). SFDP turned out to be a success under many circumstances, as it was flexibly applied, taking into consideration the prevailing local political context and cultural traditions (Huizer, 1997).

The success of these pilot projects led to the multiplication of PPP-based projects following in the footsteps of SFDP. Since the early 1990s, the International Potato Center (CIP) for example has worked in Nepal to apply a Participatory Development Programme helping farming communities effectively manage constraints in potato production. It began with a pilot activity in two hill communities and then in 1998 developed to become a nation-wide programme. An impact evaluation was conducted in 2004, showing that gross and net returns to land and labour significantly increased. But the programme was not without its problems. In the pilot project, activities in the second village were terminated because grassroots groups and group organizers were not ready to implement the project. Meanwhile at the national level, the project implementers realized that it required longer-term funding commitment from the government (Campilan, 2005).

An evaluation study done in 2006 by UNCAPSA staff on a decentralized agriculture and extension projects in Indonesia shows that there is no clear indication that the PPP method directly improved the welfare of rural people. Field research indicated that provision of inputs and services to target groups was not constant over the project's time frame (five years). But still the project provided some benefits for the farmers, including better knowledge in how to acquire resources; learning how to make proposals and how to discuss and decide together about priorities.

A UNU and WIDER analysis of forty-six Dutch-funded projects carried out between 1975 and 2005 in Asia, Africa and Latin America was conducted in 2006. Earlier projects were based on top-down planning but over the years bottom-up approach became more popular. The projects were clustered into 'success' and 'failures'. Projects in relatively marginal and isolated areas in poor countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were successful because they helped farmers improve food security. On the other hand, cases in Nepal, Philippines, and Central American were seen as failures. Failure was mainly caused by inappropriate project design and inconsistent implementation, while success was mainly associated with a clear target-group focus and sufficient attention to empowerment. The analysis highlighted the importance of project development in line with the local context and trends, which is why grassroots participation and dialogue are essential (Zoomers, 2006).

Should, therefore, the participatory approach be revised or reformulated in order to make it more relevant for poverty alleviation in rural areas and an option for rural development? Yes, PPP definitely needs improvement. To build upon success of SFDP, perhaps we need to go back to FAO's fundamental 'essential elements'. Beside those elements, the case of Nepal and the study by UNU and WIDER indicate that Government support and continuous programmes are also very essential factors to the success of PPP. Keeping in mind that the rural poor have little to fall back on, repackaging the participatory approach can be seen as an option for rural development, not only in agriculture but also for infrastructure, education, health, and all supporting factors needed for poverty alleviation. ■

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(References available upon request)