

MOBILIZATION OF RURAL PEOPLE FOR SELF-HELP WORK THROUGH VOLUNTARY ACTION

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There appears to be a widespread belief among development thinkers, planners and administrators that rural communities are a disorganised lot, and therefore, that they should be organised for group effort and self-help. Without such an exercise in organisation, it is presumed that their master plans, research findings and political decisions, which are designed to improve the conditions of the rural communities, can never be meaningful or effective. We cannot subscribe to this view. On the contrary, we reject totally this approach at the root of which we believe is arrogance on the part of such thinkers, born out of a feeling of belonging to a decision-making establishment, which has power over the helpless rural communities.

Nobody needs to teach rural communities 'group effort' and 'self-help'. Sharing is an inherent characteristic among the rural poor, in particular it is essential for their survival, even if they live below the poverty-line level, it defends them against the exploitative arms of a commercial civilisation making further inroad to their way of life.

The real questions, therefore, are what are the constraints that inhibit the expression of the group effort and self-help designed to improve food and nutrition levels, clothing, shelter, health, sanitation, education and enhance cultural life? How can rural communities be helped to remove these constraints? What are the ways and means by which appropriate sciences and technologies can be integrated into the life of rural communities without disturbing their cohesive qualities and without exposing them to further enslavement by advanced knowledge and techniques?

The approach that we have been using has been influenced by the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka, which has been trying to find practical answers to above questions for over 40 years. Shramadana is the sharing of one's time, thought and energy. This is one of the most important means of achieving the wellbeing of all. How best can the intelligence, knowledge, skills and capabilities of the members of a group be pooled together for the benefit of themselves and their society?

In Asia, the old social order ensured the continuation of a contented, dignified and satisfied people for centuries. With the advent of commercialism from the west and the subsequent conquests of our land by foreigners, the old order broke down without being replaced by a viable new one. The values, technologies and socio-economic political structures were never replaced by a coherent whole, resembling the old stable society, where the elements of individual, family, village or national life were integrated and functioned as a harmonious whole.

The real crisis then is that man and his society, his environment and knowledge, are running amok like a dislocated planetary system ending up in collisions and destructions. We, therefore, experience food crises, energy crises, pollution crises, and a myriad of other crises that are

merely the symptoms of a deeper basic crises -a psychological crises in the very essence of our civilisation. In this context, we believe that the only hope lies in man's quest to rediscover himself and his society from the point of a total human personality, a total family unit, a total rural or urban group, and a total global family. Simultaneously, there should be a process of the elimination of the contradictions giving rise to these inequalities.

THE BANGLADESH CONTEXT

Rural dwellers account for 80% of the world population, the majority of which live without the basic requirements for sustaining their lives. Most governments can not provide basic necessities - this perpetuates the problem. Bangladesh has the highest population density of any non-city state, more than half the population live below the poverty line. With a population of 123 million it is the fifth largest country in the world. Bangladeshis make up approximately 7.2% of the world's poor (UNDP 1994).

To address the problems that prevail in rural communities we launched a project, which aimed at helping people to find their own solutions. We worked with community groups in community meetings. Access to a local NGO paved the way for us to reach village people and develop contacts among village leaders. The villagers discussed the problems they had been encountering over the last few years. We asked them to choose the problem that the majority people felt needed to be urgently addressed. There was agreement that a school was required. With poor infrastructure, villagers could not send their youngest children to school, as the nearest school was 2-3 km away. The villagers had requested the government, for more than 20 years to provide a school - without success.

When the majority of people wanted to have a school everyone in the community extended their support to the idea. The next question we asked the villagers was where to build the school and who will donate the land? This was discussed at length and after some disagreement three elderly landowners donated land. Next we asked what materials were needed to build the school; a group of village leaders made a list. The collection of materials bamboo's, timbers, and local roofing materials was undertaken by the villagers. Those not able to provide materials agreed to contribute their labour.

Once the community had collected the required materials, the school was built within 4 days. The people who had contributed their time, hard labour and the necessary skills perceived this as a miracle. They had waited to have a school for more than 20 years and now had built one within 4 days. This surprised the local government so much that the District Commissioner decided to visit the project and meet the villagers. This was the first time that the District Commissioner had visited the village; the villagers discussed their problems. This was yet another confidence building achievement both amongst the villagers and their neighbouring communities.

Everyone in the village and the administration of the local and district governments recognised the services of the local NGO and extended their full support and co-operation towards the on going voluntary activities of the organisation. In this instance, what we did was to remove a perceived constraint, that had lasted for more than 20 years, we demonstrated that solution

was well within the reach of the community. This is classic example of breaking down the self-made barriers of 'dependence'.

Sarvodaya used the sharing of time, thought and energy - "Shramadana", as the heart of its village development strategy in Sri Lanka. Any village community, from the most primitive to the most progressive can continuously use the Shramadana Camp. It can be used for infra-structural work such as access roads to the village, soil conservation, ponds, health and sanitation facilities, community centres, schools, post flood and cyclone rehabilitation work etc. An enlightened and dynamic village leadership can use this technique to provide a foundation for the satisfaction of basic human needs, on a programmed basis.

The Shramadana Camp is the initiation process for integrated change in three areas. Shramadana helps people to come together psychologically and physically to undertake common tasks. It helps them use their own know-how and technologies. It stimulates them to think of new structural relationships that they can adopt among themselves in their economic and political relationships, to ensure a healthier social environment.

We have experienced that rural communities have their own potential, which can be evoked, provided:

- (i) People have a thought that unites them
- (ii) They use techniques within their capacity and
- (iii) have an organisational structure under their control

We motivated people to organise rural community groups to improve their socio-economic conditions, by applying the Sarvodaya and IIRR approaches with the integration of the IAVE concept. We found that the empowering of rural community groups by organising them into smaller groups was the most effective strategy to eliminate the main obstacles which make rural people vulnerable - disunity, illiteracy, poverty and ignorance.

It is not surprising that people in third world countries lived together in clusters and helped each other in their day to day activities. This volunteering was part of their culture, binding people together for a better tomorrow. The system still continues in some communities, groups, but it is being rapidly replaced by projects designed applying incorrect modern development principles. Some NGOs have been working without proper planning and have executed donor driven demands with the community people. The results achieved through these projects increase the dependency of the community towards donors and NGOs rather than encouraging self-reliance.

The goal of sustainable human development is to create an enabling environment where all people can act to improve the quality of their lives. Our project focuses mainly on sustainable, people centred, human development and gives the highest priority to poverty reduction, sustainable livelihoods, environmental regeneration and women's participation in all phases of the development process.

The majority comprising perhaps 70% of the world's poorest people are women. Their poverty is associated with unequal access to productive resources and control of assets, together with poor health, lack of education, personal insecurity and limited participation in public life. The abolition of poverty cannot be achieved until men and women have equal access to the resources and services necessary to achieve their individual potential and fulfil their obligations to household, community and more broadly to society.

Poor women are frequently doubly disadvantaged (because of their poverty and their gender) in their access to services, their control over economic resources and in their participation in public life. This lack of access perpetuates gender inequality. Poor women are more likely than poor men to suffer from non-material aspects of poverty; isolation, lack of information, the inability to have their voices heard and increased vulnerability to personal and social forms of violence.

Effective poverty reduction requires policies that recognise the multiple roles of women. We need to encourage and support macro-economic policies and development strategies that respond to the needs and efforts of women in poverty. We must recognise the importance of women's informal and unpaid social as well as economic work for improving their livelihoods. When we encouraged women to undertake homestead gardening we experienced positive results and more members responded to the project. This was done on voluntary basis, where trained volunteer leaders took the responsibility for implementing the project.

Lastly, attaining sustainable human development is not possible without good governance. Improving governance means effecting change at the local, national, regional and global levels. Building capacity for local governance requires involving civil society organisations and the private sector, in partnership with government. Building capacity in all three domains of governance - the state, civil society and the private sector is critical for sustaining human development.

THE CULTURAL ROOTS OF VOLUNTEERISM IN ASIA:

“Volunteerism“ is a way of life in most of the Asian community groups and working on a collective basis has continued for thousands of years. The process helped to maintain and protect the traditional value system and reflected the strong unity of the community groups. Helping each other by extending services through voluntary work became a moral obligation.

Under the traditional value system people exchange their agricultural produce, there is no money involved people rely on their neighbours and other community groups. It breaks the barriers of political, social and other indifferences that separate the rural people. Through voluntary work everyone in the rural area has a chance to act together, to create a different atmosphere, a new path towards development.

In the past relationships and the sense of belonging among community members was very strong, they relied on their resources. Due to this strong foundation volunteerism still continues in the villages. Yet, somehow today volunteerism is fading out rapidly from the villages even given a strong cultural identity.

The cause behind losing our identity, culture and the traditional value system is poorly planned modernisation and misguided development efforts threaten our way of life. Still today most of the natural resources which exist in the rural areas are well protected by the rural people because their lives depend on their natural habitat. These resources can only be protected through education and awareness building among the rural community. We can only do this by voluntary work, by mobilising each one of them in the rural areas to protect the forests, water resources, indigenous knowledge, the environment, medicinal plants, wild food varieties, wild life etc.

Organising community groups to perform voluntary activities will develop confidence among villages that they can achieve a lot by collective action. We have to select genuine rural leaders and provide them with the necessary training to help them to identify their problems and to find solutions. The identification and use of available resources is the most vital role in self-help work. When people realised that they could identify their own problems and at the same time find solutions to them, they will not only help themselves, but they will also assist their neighbours.

Assisting rural people in livelihood projects such as farming, home gardening and small business leads to sustainability. Without economic empowerment there will be no further development. Priority has to be given to livelihood projects in order to develop sustainable communities. Through our livelihood component we help the villagers to release their productive powers to combat poverty.

In order to attain community empowerment we focus on four major components through voluntary work.

1. Health
2. Livelihood
3. Education
4. Self-government

When we develop projects for village communities we place a high priority on health. Where people are unhealthy we do not have the very strong communities necessary to undertake various development activities. Therefore, creating awareness on clean environment, the use of clean water, basic primary health care, sanitation, latrines, sufficient food, nutrition, prevention from various diseases and immunisation are some of the activities that are necessary to promote voluntary activities.

Organising community groups through village meetings, conducting mobile health camps in each village and educating villagers on primary health care and health education is very important in securing healthy communities. Today, throughout much of the world many people become infected with water borne diseases and other epidemics due to insufficient health care and health promotion in rural areas. Voluntary work can be used to create awareness on epidemic diseases and promoting preventive methods among communities.

Due to economic hardship in most rural areas many people sell their century old trees and allow some illegal loggers to destroy their habitat. This can only stop if we create a strong campaign and educate village people on the importance of environmental protection.

Through the livelihood program we help the rural people through their organisations, release their productive powers to combat poverty. This we do by training and assisting them in identifying, planning , implementing and evaluating food production and income generating projects and activities. Our technical assistance, on the other hand, is in the form of low-interest, non collateralised group loans. They will also get individual loan for agricultural farming, small business etc..

Education is another very important component, which enables rural people to release their intellectual power, to combat illiteracy or ignorance. Villagers' illiteracy and ignorance include not only, the lack of reading, writing and computation skills, but also a low-level of awareness or consciousness about the nature and causes of their problems. They include limited skills in critical analysis, problem -solving and decision making, as well as insufficient technical information needed for decision making.

Through the self-government component we enable rural people to realise their political and organising power to combat civic inertia. The term civic inertia connotes not only absence or lack of interest in civic or community affairs, but also the lack of opportunity to meaningfully participate in decision making, particularly on matters affecting their lives due to their lack of political power or leverage. The setting up of village committees assists villagers to join the legal or legitimate organisations of their own choice and over which they can exercise sufficient control. Such organisations can become their venue for actively participating in decision-making within and outside their communities, and for undertaking collective action to address their problems and realise their aspirations.

Volunteerism has to be returned to the centre of development. By placing a high priority on voluntarism in rural development work we can bring about positive changes among the majority of the worlds' population.

PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION

Experiences by both governments and non-government organisations in developing countries over the past decades has revealed a number of characteristic weaknesses in various approaches/strategies intended to achieve development. One reason suggested by Korten in (1990) for the failure of these movements was that the programs have been creations of governments (and NGOs), rather than voluntary creations of individuals to increase their collective power.

One alternative offered by social scientists and development advocates alike is "participation". Defined simply, participation is "the art of taking part or having a share with others in some action". The concept of people's participation must take as its base the realisation of the will of the people to become involved in their own development, the need to instil in people the importance of acting together and defining their individual problems.

The sustainability of many rural communities is tied up with doing things as they have always been done. This is important to them. In trying to help them, we must start from what really matters to people.

Go to the people

Live among the people

Learn from the people

Plan with the people

Work with people

Start with what the people know

Build on what the people have

Teach by showing; learn by doing

This Chinese proverb articulates rural development principles that remain valid today even if they are largely ignored; they are operationalised in some of the more exiting methodologies for village level decision-making.

No one can make another person develop or change, people only change when they want to. Merely funding activities does not mean that a community has changed. People may be resigned to what takes place because they feel their opinion is not respected or that they do not have the power to intervene. Such a response might appear to be a sign of courtesy or feudalism within the culture. However, by living among, and learning from a community, we come to appreciate them and gain their respect.

Only when we can organise rural people for self-help work and bring positive changes in their lives can we focus on other life threatening factors that affect our societies. If rural people can not find solutions to their basic needs the damage and the destruction of the environment will continue, resulting in further ecological imbalance.

References:

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