



## 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)*

Flash **BREAKING****China to Establish 200,000 Rural Libraries by 2010**

In a major move to bridge the "information gap" and help farmers, China will establish 200,000 libraries in rural areas by the year 2010. The Rural Library Project aims to gradually solve the long-standing difficulty of farmers getting good books to read. Each Library will have at least 1,000 books, 30 newspapers and audio and video products that are "useful and understandable" to farmers. The libraries, supported by government funds and donations from society, will be managed by farmers themselves. The project has been carried out before on a trial basis in more than 10 provinces and municipalities. More than 3,000 rural libraries have already been built.

Xinhuanet, 2006. China to Establish 200,000 Rural Libraries by 2010, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>, (31 December 2006).

**Poor Switching to Corn as Rice Price Skyrockets**

Thousands of poor people in the remote, hilly region of Banyumas in Central Java, Indonesia are switching to corn as their staple food of rice becomes increasingly expensive. Meanwhile the local regent claims he can do nothing about the price increase. Rice is now being sold for up to Rp 5,500 (57 U.S. cents) a kilogram. Previously a kilogram of rice cost Rp 3,500. Prices are high in the region because of last year's long drought. The villagers are used to switching to corn in times of hardship. However, currently families cannot afford side dishes and are eating dried rice, recycled from previous meals.

Maryono, Agus. Poor Switching to Corn as Rice Price Skyrockets, the Jakarta Post, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/>, (12 January 2007).

**Government of Iran Ready to Cede Agricultural Affairs to Farmers**

President Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said that the government is ready to cede all agricultural affairs to the farmers. Addressing a group of exemplary farmers, he ordered the Ministry of Agricultural Jihad and Ministry of Industries and Mines to study the project. He underlined that the proposal will be implemented if the farmers prove that it would be more fruitful than the current system. Stressing the need for a 'scientific agriculture benefiting from all existing capabilities' he said a developed village is the cornerstone of a developed country and the role of industrialists and workers are of prime importance to this end. He also pointed out that low bank lending rates could create significant growth in the sector.

FAO Regional Office for the Near East, 2007. Iran... President- Gov't ready to cede agricultural affairs to farmers, <http://agriculturenews.fao.orne.net/>, (1 January 2007).

**Viet Nam Strives to Curb Poverty Level Below 16 Per Cent**

Viet Nam targets to reduce the rate of poor households to below 16 per cent in 2007 after achieving a 3 per cent reduction to 18.1 per cent in 2006. The Southeastern region was said to have the lowest percentage of poor household with 7.4 per cent. The highest number of households living in poverty is located in the northwestern and northeastern areas with 37.3 per cent and 28.3 per cent of the population. The State and local authorities have spent a total of VND 30 billion (US\$ 1.87 million) to organize 1,200 courses to transfer poultry breeding and plantation techniques to more than 700,000 poor people. The Viet Nam Bank for Social Policies approved loans totalling over VND 9.3 billion (US\$ 0.58 million) for 1.5 million poor households to develop family-based production activities.

Nhân Dân, 2007. Vietnam Strives to Curb Poverty Level Below 16%, <http://www.nhandan.com.vn>, (12 January 2007).

**Biomass Industry to Create more Rural Jobs**

IFPRI says that biomass-based industries will create a significant number of rural jobs and stir up economic activity in poverty-stricken areas while providing huge amounts of electricity. Biomass production is especially beneficial in rural areas where agriculture is the basic source of livelihood since residues or waste from farming are important biomass energy sources in densely populated regions. Crops may actually be specifically planted to produce biomass, although this may raise concern for competition between food crops and crops for biomass. Competition can be minimized if degraded land and surplus agricultural land are targeted for energy crops. Though these lands are less productive, targeting them for bio-energy plantations can have secondary benefits including restoration of degraded lands. In developing countries, it is estimated that degraded land reaches up to two billion hectares; pilot farms have proven that growing energy crops on degraded land can be successful. Another benefit of devoting land for biomass crops is that it contributes to reduce global warming through carbon sequestration. ■

Based on Subong, ES, 2007. Biomass Industry to Create More Rural Jobs. Harold Doan and Associates Ltd., <http://www.harolddoan.com>, (3 January 2007).

**Agricultural Technology Transfer to Developing Countries and the Public Sector**

Over the last two decades, biotechnology for agricultural production has developed rapidly, and the world economy has become more globalized and liberalized. This has boosted private investment in agricultural research and technology, exposing agriculture in developing countries to international markets and the influence of multinational corporations. However, the public sector still has a role to play, particularly in managing the new knowledge, supporting research to fill any remaining gaps, promoting and regulating private companies, and ensuring their effects on the environment are adequately assessed. The new economic and scientific context requires a new, more complex, model for transferring technology. The evolving model has four main components: knowledge management, gap-filling research, promotion and regulation of the private sector, and environmental impact analysis. If the public sector focuses on these four topics, it will continue to support relevant transfers of agricultural technology. In particular, public sector organizations need to join forces with the private sector to provide reliable funding and sources of trained personnel to improve agricultural technology policy in developing countries. This should occur in co-operation with international mechanism and research institutions in the developed world. Agricultural innovation has always come from collaborations between public institutions, the scientific community and agriculturalists themselves. Now, with the private sector's growing importance in the innovation process, the challenge facing the public sector is to bridge the gap and work together with these new players. ■

Based on Piñeiro, Martín, 2007. Agricultural Technology Transfer to Developing Countries and the Public Sector. SciDev Net, <http://www.scidev.net>, (January 2007).

## Programme to Improve Access to Financial Services for Pakistan's Poor

An ADB loan package totalling US\$320 million will improve access of Pakistan's poor to wider financial services. Pakistan has achieved growth rates averaging over 7.5 per cent for the past three years. Reforms have led to a better and more predictable environment for public and private investment and thus to job creation and higher incomes. This growth has cut poverty and increased prosperity. However, 24 per cent of the population still lives below the poverty line. Microfinance reaches fewer than 1 million people in Pakistan, but the potential market is many times this size - about 20 million people. The Government has thus made microfinance a key theme under its Medium-Term Development Framework 2005-2010 and the broader Strategic Directions to Achieve Vision 2030. Building a more inclusive financial sector means deepening the quality of the service and expanding the coverage, while at the same time striving for efficiency. The programme is supported by two loans - \$300 million from ADB's ordinary capital resources (OCR) with a 15-year term (including a grace period of three years) and \$20 million from ADB's concessional Special Funds resources with a 24-year term (including a grace period of eight years). The Ministry of Finance is the executing agency for the programme, which will be conducted over about two years. ■

Based on ADB, 2006. Program to Improve Access to Financial Services for Pakistan's Poor, <http://www.adb.org/>, (22 December 2006).

## Will India Consume Commodities?

Poverty is so severe in India that millions of farm hands agree to work for wages as low as 12 rupees a day or 25 cents for an eight hour day. In India, a whopping 300 million people are food insecure. Why is agriculture important? Because more than 60 per cent of Indian population depends on it. Sadly the agri-sector is growing at 1 per cent against the rest of the economy and farmers are not gaining at all even as the rest of the economy is expanding at 10 per cent. Four-fifths of the farmers practice rainfed agriculture and are therefore dependent on the increasingly unpredictable rains. The farmers are able to work only for about four months per year, with the rest often going in search of petty jobs like lifting bricks on construction sites or digging mud for paving the highways. Not surprisingly, millions of farmers are waiting to move to the cities and do not wish their children to join their profession. The government is yet to wake up to the unpleasant reality that the economic viability of farming - as well as its sustainability - must be made a top priority. The country is losing thousands of farms and millions of farmers. The country is losing its precious farming talent and is on its way to become the net importer of various farm products. The government does everything it can to keep the prices of wheat, rice and pulses low, in order to satisfy the consumers. Instead of artificially protecting markets, the government needs to enhance the farm output, and introduce organic production methods, which sustain economic returns and soil health. ■

Based on Kakani, Shailendra, 2006. Will India Consume Commodities? <http://www.resourceinvestor.com>, (28 December 2006).

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## Book Review

# Will the Boat Sink the Water? The Life of China's Peasants

Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, translated by Zhu Hong, Public Affairs, USA, 2006. ISBN 978-1-58648-358-6

Since the adoption of economic reforms in 1978, economic growth and poverty reduction in China have been spectacular. Almost as spectacular, but much less heartening, is the growth in inequality between rural and urban areas, to the point where the average urban income is now more than three-and-a-half times the average rural income.

Over the last couple of decades or so, state power in China has been significantly devolved. Although the spirit behind decentralization is laudable, the results are less than perfect. The lower echelons are under funded and beyond the control of distant Beijing, so local governments frequently abuse their tax and levy collecting duties, creating a tax system that is arbitrary, corrupt and unfair, and places a heavy burden on peasants. The result is resentment of the state by the rural population, resentment that has often boiled over into violent protests.

This is the scene for a striking work by two Chinese journalists, Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, "Will the Boat Sink the Water? The Life of China's Peasants". The title is drawn from a Chinese idiom, 'water holds up the boat, water also sinks the boat', the water in this case symbolizing the Chinese peasant. The book is not a work of academic scholarship, rather investigative journalism, but it succeeds where many academic works do not: in revealing the texture and day-to-day reality of the poor.

The authors returned to their home province of Anhui, which although only a few hundred miles from Shanghai, is one of China's poorest, to investigate the lives of the peasants. The result is a series of portraits of unchecked corruption, brutal enforcement by local officials, and the consequent immiseration of the peasants.

The peasants' heavy tax burden is partly explained by the proliferation of the bureaucracy during the 1990s as a result of decentralization. However, the authors argue that crippling agricultural taxation is merely a new chapter in the development of modern China, where the peasants have provided the hard work and sacrifice, but their toil has gone unrewarded.

The main source of hardship for the peasants seems to corruption by petty officials. Despite the animosity towards local government, it appears from the anecdotes that China's peasants perceive their central government to be fundamentally benevolent, despite its distance. It is common to make "petitions" to the central government complaining about abuses of power by lower levels of government.

However, Beijing seems impotent in the face of local corruption. In 1997, the government made a concerted effort to reduce excessive taxation. In the same year, the tax burden for the peasants was four times the average of the previous four years. In 2002, the central government introduced rural tax reform in 20 provinces replacing informal local charges with state agricultural taxes. Local governments soon found themselves short of funds and informal charges rebounded. Well-intended legislation can not only be ignored, but also be used as an opportunity for corruption. For example, the one-child policy turned into a 'veritable gold mine' for the cadres; in a single village, a birth-control inspection team imposed 3 million yuan in fines over the space of one month.

The authors contend that the source of corruption is systemic: the overlay of communism on feudalism has created a system where local officials do mostly as they please. Legislation and decrees from the central government are not a comprehensive solution; in fact what is needed is reform of China's political system.

The stark inequalities in China are another source of angst for the peasants. Chen and Wu describe how two Chinas have been created through the segregation of urban and rural populations, where peasants are not permitted to move to the city and are 'chained' to the countryside to grow grain 'to feed the city population'. A multi-country study by the World Bank supports their contention, concluding that the best policy for reducing regional inequality within nations is not a pro-active interventionist policy, as one may expect, but to merely allow inter-regional factor mobility, including labour migration.

Since the book was written (the Chinese version was published in 2003) agricultural taxes have been rescinded, and Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao are taking a keen interest in the countryside. However, the central messages of the book - rural-urban inequality, local corruption and China's political system - remain relevant. Chinese peasants are now struggling against the (often corrupt) appropriation of their agricultural lands for development. For other countries in the region where rural poverty is a priority, there are many useful lessons about the risks of unequal development and decentralization. ■

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