SELF-RELIANCE IN LOW-COST RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Eighty percent of Pakistan's population lives in rural areas the major source of livlihood of which is agriculture. Since independence, very little attention has been paid to the uplift of this large proportion of country's population, although a number of institutions like Village Aid, Union Councils, Village and Town Committees, Integrated Rural Development Programme and Peoples Works Programme came into existence. These institutions failed to achieve the intended objectives because of bureaucratic control and lack of peoples participation.

This paper reviews institutional weaknesses as in the past and suggests that all rural development planning should originate from villages through the technical sssistance of Extension Workers. In order to encourage involvement of rural people in development work, one of the criteria for accepting a development scheme should be the contribution of the peoples in providing voluntary labour. This would keep the people aware of their share in the development of their areas and remove the misunderstanding in the minds of many that development is solely the responsibility of the government. The paper emphasises on self reliance in technology and full exploitation of our indigenous material and human resources to reduce the cost of rural development.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Eighty percent of Pakistan's population lives in rural areas the major source of livlihood of which is agriculture. A very large proportion directly work in the farms as farmers and a small percentage provide the support services, such as artisans, masons blacksmiths, carpenters and workers. Thus there exists a variety of skills in each village.

In the pre-independence period this majority of the population was placed under supressed conditions through the elite district administration and the feudal lords who inherited large tracts of productive agricultural land in the country as gifts and jagirs for showing allegiance to the government and provided able- bodied peasantry for the Armed Forces. Marble Plagues can still be seen in the community centres of some of the old villages with the inscription of the number of people of the village who had laid down their lives in World Wars-I and II. No such memory plagues have been made for those who laid down their lives in the defence of Pakistan in the 1965 and 1971 wars. Nambardari system introduced in the colonial period and prevalent even now after thirty years of independence is another example of the suppressive attitude of the feudal zamindars over the poor peasants. This system has never allowed a collective social system to be established in rural areas for active participation of the people in development of their areas.

In the last three decades rural community has been organised, to develop on self help basis, through the formation of various institutions like Village Aid, Union Councils, Integrated Rural Development Programme and Peoples Works Programme. In the early sixties development on self-help basis gained some impetus. People built roads in the hope that the Government would run bus service to their villages; they built drainage system on the promise that water supply facilities would be provided. They even dug open wells for this purpose. However, the high hopes soon faded away because of lack of the needed minimum financial and technical assistance from the government institutions.

In the last few years, the activity of development through self-help was revitalised through peoples representatives under People Works Programme. Schools and community centres were built in the belief that some financial assistance would be provided under this programme, which never came. Some very genious low-cost methods were developed by the contractors where works were carried out through contracts under the programme. Small culverts were built with reinforcement of tree bushes covered with sand concrete only to find the first unfortunate truck getting itself entrapped. Causeways were built by dumping boulders across a stream and covering them with cement set in the bags. The results was that the causeways gave way to the first floods.The benefits of the programme are believed to have gone to a very small minority which virtually monopolised the political and economic system in rural areas. These are the basic weaknesses where there is a lack of accountability because of missing linkage with the people as a community and not as individuals. This paper reviews some of our past drawbacks in rural development planning and implementation and suggests some measures for self-reliance in low-cost development.

2.0 PRESENT RURAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY AND SELF- RELIANCE

The present Government has given top priority to rural development in the proposed Five Year Plan to provide the minimum health cover, communication, education, electricity and agriculture input facilities.For the last many years Planners have considered agricultural and rural development as two separate sectors of development with the major emphasis on the former under the impression that agriculture development would itself improve the socio-economic conditions of the "rural poor". Agriculture development made some impact, but the force of this impact could be even greater had there been parallel development of the rural areas. In fact, lack of rural development acted as a great constraint in our agriculture production.

It is now well recognised that a more equitable, self-reliant and self-sustaining development should be pursued which should be labour intensive and involve low capital. It should be based on the use of locally available material and developed with the participation of the masses. Unfortunately very little efforts have been made, in the past, on the utilization of material and human resources so as to achieve self-reliance. Self-reliance is the will of the people to develop a capacity for autonomous decision-making and implementation of the development process. Hardly any attempt has been made to form village and town Association/Committees of the rural people to manage their own development affairs on self-help basis with at least fifty percent financial contribution from the government.

Rural Development thus far has been conceptualised by government agencies and departments at the Federal and Provincial levels with little coordination between economic and physical planning. As a result, the rural people have gained the impression that development for their uplift is the responsibility of the government and that their contribution is only in the form of payment of taxes. There is a considerable awakening in the rural masses now. They know what modern facilities they need. The experience of the last thirty years indicates that rural masses have been exploited for political motives by false promises for providing them the essential facilities. Continuous failures in the fulfilment of promises have hardened the attitude of the people and led to lack of participative interest in the development process. This may be one reason why Farmers Associations or Cooperatives have not been formed and may even be the main hurdle for the well publicised Integrated Rural Development Programme.

Our rural development strategy should originate from the rural people. Preferential treatment should be given to the development schemes with greater voluntary labour cost contribution. This would provide an incentive for greater participation of the

people and will create confidence in them about the government efforts in their uplift plans. This would also lead to organisation of the farmers, artisans, workers and others for collective action in the development of their areas.

A school of thought has recently advocated the above action plan backed up by a huge pyramid of bureaucracy both at national and provincial levels, such as National Council for Rural Development, and Provincial Rural Development Boards. These would be overviewed by superpowered "Task Force" at Federal and Provincial levels to help in removing bottle-necks for the implementation of the programme. One does not understand whether the bureaucratic set up thus envisaged would revolutionise the entire rural society, but definitely it might decelerate the pace of development which the government wishes to launch. It is a common observation that we make implementation of a programme so complex that it becomes difficult to come out of the bottlenecks. The experience shows that what we have achieved in rural development in the past is nothing but bottlenecks. These were the few enterprising and influential persons who became the beneficiaries of the rural development in the past. As a matter of fact, our situation requires greater reliance on the associations/Councils/Markaz of the rural people and on their decision-making on community level on using improved technology, sharing the labour cost and in return the benefits of development. Their efforts should be strengthened by extension work aimed at providing the required technical assistance in the preparation and implementation of the development programme. The staff should be accountable to the Markaz and not to their parent department.

There is a growing tendency in our country to adopt Chinese techniques for low-cost development. Instances have been cited where Chinese techniques have been followed in grain storage structures and

have been found to be more expensive than was anticipated. This is another example of blind application of borrowed technology without adaptation. The Chinese system does not allow hired labour, but participation as co-workers on self-help basis. In grain storage structures, Chinese designs and materials have been adopted, but the structures have been constructed on hired labour under the control of PASCO. There is, therefore, a need to study a foreign technique in great depth before deciding to adopt it to our conditions. The very basis of self-reliance strategy is to generate the indigigenous capacity and put to use those elements of scientific and technological know-how which can be supplied from domestic sources and blend them with those of foreign supply in such a way that continuous increase in productivity occurs. The desired blending of the local and borrowed technology is missing in the development process in our country.

3.0 LOW-COST DEVELOPMENT

In the last few years low-cost rural development has received considerable attention in the developed as well as in the developing countries. The problems, however, differ both in magnitude and nature. The developed countries are striving to find substitutes for oil-produced energy whereas the developing countries are struggling for providing the minimum essential facilities to their rural population. The development strategy has to be compatable with our local socioeconomic structure. The development may be said to be low-cost due to reduction in cost because of:(a) improved technology, (b) use of local resources, (c) use of voluntry labour, and (d) sacrificing some of the amenities.

The thirty years of independence has been an unusually high dependence in imported capital-intensive technology which gave very little chance to the local technology to flourish. Consequently there has been excessive use of foreign exchange and other scarce factors of production, inadequate generation of job

opportunities and the undesirable growth of reliance on foreign loans. The development of local technology and a planed adaptation and adoption of foreign technology could enable the country to spend less foreign exchange, generate more jobs and ensure better income distribution. The other advantage of this development would have been the creation of a vast number of opportunities for the local technicians to bringforth their initiative, enterprise and even financial resources towards the renaissance of local skills.

The second impeding factor in the growth of local technology was the industrialisation of the urban areas which made the rural technicians and artesans to move to the urban areas thus creating an accute shortage of the required skills in the rural areas. The recent large scale migration of the technicians and skilled workers to the Middle East countries has further aggravated this situation. This may have improved our balance of payment, but the fact remains that such a periodic balance can, by no means, strengthen our efforts for self-reliance in the long run. Steps will have to be taken to train technicians in various skills in rural areas to fill the existing gap in the needed skills and to achieve the targets envisaged in the rural development.

Improved technology requires improved designs and manufacture of construction elements keeping in view the available local materials. Some private agencies have started manufacture of precast and prestressed beams, battons and slabs for roofs; some research on the improvement of size of burnt bricks has also been conducted, but the large scale impact of such construction elements on the cost of development has not been noticeable. This may be because the state of art is still at its infancy and the monopoly of a couple of agencies is controlling the prices of manufactured construction elements. Such an industry can be developed in areas lying along

the foothills and accessable by roads. The cost can further be reduced if naturally available aggregate at beds of dry rainfed nallas is used instead of the crushed one and these elements are produced on mass scale by standardising them for rural housing. The cost of these elements has to be far less than the materials being conventionally used by the people in building construction, such as wood or steel.

Mud has since long been used as a building material, particularly in arid regions and can still be used in such areas by improving the construction techniques so as to give some aesthetic appearance. Construction of vertical smooth walls by tamping earth between shutterings under natural moisture is only one of the many alternatives in this respect. Research work is needed to determine the compressive and tensile strength of mud walls composed of mixture of various soils and moisture percentages. Their behaviour under eccentic loading is particularly important. Fine clay in different colours and fine white chalk is available in hilly areas only wanting to be exploited commercially. These could be the most economical substitutes for the synthetic commercial distempering materials. Moreover, these materials have more lasting effect both on the cement and mud plastered walls.

Lime has been used as a mortar and plaster in many of the historic buildings built during the Mughal period and has stood the weathering effect for centuries. There is, therefore, an imperative need to use lime mortar and plaster in low-cost rural buildings. It provides a challenge for research to the Building Materials Research Stations and the universities. The soil-cement blocks is another area worth further investigations. In fact, it would not be out of context to say that no research work worth the name has been done in the country on the use of indigenous materials.

Some initiative was taken by the Appropriate Technology Section in the Planning Division, Government of Pakistan, to design low-cost turbines and electricity generating sets, low-cost houses for flood affected areas and use of biogas and solar energy as sources of production. This section, however, seems to thrive more on publicity than on a real solid appropriate technology development work. The aims are genuine, but there is a divergence of opinion on the means to achieve these aims. Development of appropriate technology is a modest attempt and must be conceived as such in the realisation of its objectives to make some humble contribution in low-cost rural development.

There is also a difference of opinion on whether the high standards of specifications prescribed for public works are followed in their true spirit. There are some who believe that these specifications are sacrified to some extent in the construction of works thereby paving way for corruption. T ey advocate prescription of specifications as actually applied in the construction work and thus reduce the building cost. There are others who justify such specifications because of a number of unknown factors in design and lack of quality control in construction work. One wonders whether all the development that has taken place in modern design and construction techniques, has not reduced the number of unknowns. These are the matters to ponder over in the general interest of economy in construction of public works for rural development. The author does not consider himself an authority to give his opinion about a field with which he is not intimately connected. It is hoped that professional engineers would come out with some suggestions in this respect during the course of discussions.

4.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The views expressed in this paper have arisen out of authors personal observations and study of the past approaches to rural development. The ideas expressed are without any prejudice or a reflection on any organisation either directly or indirectly.