

CATALYTIC ACTION
to promote
PARTICIPATORY RURAL DEVELOPMENT
(A review of methodology and experiences)*

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INTRODUCTION

1. Since September 1977 the ILO has been running an experimental programme on participation of the rural poor in the development process under the coordination of the present writer. The programme, called PORP, aims to contribute to understanding of the problems and ways of promoting participation of poor and underprivileged sections of rural communities in the Third World, and to the promotion of action in this direction. Participation is viewed as the taking of collective Initiatives by the (rural) poor in an organised framework, following self-deliberation, and self-managing the tasks initiated.

2. Over the last seven years PORP has initiated a few field action projects of its own, and has also interacted with and assisted in different ways in a number of independent initiatives. From this experience some understanding of the ways and implications of taking catalytic action to promote participatory rural development has been gained. There cannot be any standard blueprint for action in this extremely complex, sensitive and unpredictable area, whose 'failures' are probably more numerous than 'successes'. However, more and more 'impressive' initiatives are getting known, impressive not in the sense of unquestionable success but in the sense of initiatives which are moving forward, through difficulties and making mistakes and learning from them, asserting an unfolding personality which may be criticised for their many shortcomings but may not be dismissed. To reflect upon the experiences of such initiatives can be educative, not by way of teaching how to play what is essentially a game of chess against counterforces, but in becoming aware of considerations and probable outcomes of specific approaches in specific

circumstances. It is only in this sense that the following may provide some 'guidance' to some agencies who are engaged in grass-roots participation promotion work or wish to do such work, and in sensitising others who wish to play a supporting role.

- 3 The discussion is based on a set of experiences in Asia with which PORP has been closely in touch. These are :
 1. Experience of a Research Council in the Ministry of Public Administration of the Government of Sri Lanka, and subsequently that of PIDA (Participatory Institute for Development Alternatives) a Sri Lankan NGO, in action research in cadre creation and self-reliant development of the rural poor, popularly known as the Change Agents Programme;
 2. Experience of the Rural Action Project in India, first under the NIBM (National Institute for Bank Management, Bombay) and subsequently under PIDT (People's Institute for Development and Training, New Delhi);
 3. Work of PROSHIKA, a non-government development agency in Bangladesh;
 4. Experience of Project AID subsequently transformed into SARILAKAS, under the Bureau of Rural Workers in the Ministry of Labour and Employment in the Philippines; and
 5. Experience of the SFDP (Small Farmer Development Programme) in Nepal.
4. Of these five, the first four experiences are discussed integrally, as their works have been converging, broadly speaking, to a common conceptual and methodological perspective. The SFDP's experience is then contrasted to the perspective, followed by some concluding observations¹.

¹ Detailed case studies of the Sri Lankan and. Bangladesh experiences are reported in M.A. Rahman (ed.) Grass-roots Participation and Self-reliance: Experiences in South and South East Asia, Oxford and IBH, New Delhi, 1984. The Rural Action Project is periodically reported upon in *Other India*, Journal of the

5. As the above experiences pinpoint people's self-investigation and analysis as the key to liberating their initiatives, an annex outlines the methodology of participatory research as it has been synthesised from experiences in a PORP participatory research project in three countries in Latin America - Colombia, Mexico and Nicaragua.

2. THE INITIATORS

6. Initiative to stimulate self-organisation and collective action by the rural poor are not in the normal scheme of conventional governments who consider themselves, and not the people and still less the oppressed classes, to have the main responsibility for society's development. Certain left wing intellectuals and political parties conceive of mobilisation of the oppressed classes for revolutionary social transformation, under the direction of a 'vanguard' group assumed to possess 'advanced consciousness'. In this thinking also self-mobilisation of the oppressed stimulated by their own consciousness would be considered deviational, although, paradoxically, liberation of the creative energy of the oppressed classes remain the professed objective of these quarters. It is also considered by the left that the first task in social transformation is political mobilisation of the oppressed to overthrow the existing system; and to engage in economic and socio-cultural mobilisation before the political change is achieved is to delay or distract this process.
7. Neither conventional governments nor 'revolutionaries', therefore, initiate self-mobilisation of the rural poor outside the framework of conventional bureaucratic or political action. Typically, self-mobilisation of the rural poor is initiated by concerned individuals or groups who have some measure of personal commitment to people's participation and

People's Institute for Development and Training (PIDT). A report on SARILAKAS is available in Md. Anisur Rahman, *SARILAKAS, A Pilot Project for Stimulating Grass-roots Participation in the Philippines*, Technical Co-operation Evaluation Report, ILO, Geneva, 1983. A discussion of the Nepal Small Farmer Development Programme is available in dharam Ghai and Md. Anisur Rahman, "The Small Farmer Development Programme", Md. Anisur Rahman (edited) *Grass-roots Participation and Self-reliance*, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., New Delhi, 1984.

self-reliance. Such persons may happen to work in a government agency, or may have worked in a "revolutionary" political party and have become disillusioned. Often the initiators emerge from broader social movements such as a nationalist struggle in the course of which they had integrated with the ordinary people and became transformed, to seek fulfillment in working toward liberation of these people without subscribing to any ideological orthodoxy. The initiators in PIDA, PIDT, PROSHIKA and SARILAKAS belong to one or other such trends.

3. CADRE CREATION

8. Broadly, the conception in these initiatives has been that underprivileged sections of rural society should be stimulated to shake off their attitudes of depending upon rural elites and government agencies for their life and its development, and to take collective action of their own to develop themselves. In this, sympathetic outsiders should play a catalytic and facilitating and not a dominating role.
9. Initiation of such catalytic work obviously requires special kinds of field workers (cadres) who have to be carefully recruited and trained (or sensitised). There are two streams of cadres. One stream is directly recruited by the initiating agency, and its members do not necessarily come from the areas where action is initiated. As action progresses, new cadres emerge from within the action areas attracted by the conception and course of the initiative. These emerge from among the educated rural youth or/and from among the under-privileged sections themselves. Some of these second stream cadres are also given training /sensitisation by the initiating agency. Others are "self-created," taking up leading roles in an on-going movement by virtue of their own inherent qualities.
10. Typically, the training process has combined analytical discussion with field investigation and living the village life in daily interaction with the rural poor. Some action has often resulted from the interaction, either by the very design of training or spontaneously. Group review by the trainees of the on-going experience has been a systematic and important

component of their training. Analysis of the past experience of the trainee of a rural development effort with which they have been involved or familiar, has also been emphasised.

11. The field investigations and the analysis have given the greatest emphasis on understanding the social relations and socio-economic processes which have been responsible for perpetuation of rural poverty, exploitation and oppression. The premise has been that action aimed at promoting participation of the rural poor in development must be rooted in an awareness of village social reality and power structure as they exist, and links of this reality with national and international processes. Analysis in the training process has thus been multi-disciplinary, whereas the trainees come from various disciplinary backgrounds.
12. The following account² illustrates the training design of one of the initiating agencies - the Research Council in the Ministry of Public Administration in Sri Lanka - which followed the above conception in a programme started in August 1978.

Twenty-three persons, mostly government officials, with diverse backgrounds and experience, were selected for training as core development trainers (CDTs). Most of them were in the age category 30-35 and were graduates. Most of them also came from rural lower middle-class backgrounds. Although the number required for the project was 15, a larger number was selected to allow for possible drop-outs. After six months of training, the number that remained was in fact 15.

Starting with a training workshop, the first step in the training process was learning through one's own and others' past experiences in development activities followed by collective analysis of the lessons to be derived from these experiences. The second step was for each participant to describe the socio-economic picture of a village known to him or her. For this purpose, the participants were given an opportunity of visiting selected villages to familiarise themselves with the village situation. The presentations were

discussed and analysed by the group as a whole. In each of the above two steps broad generalisations were drawn collectively, which in turn enabled each participant to reflect more fully on his or her individual experience.

The third step was a direct exposure to village life by an involvement in village investigation. As a preparation for this step, the trainees discussed the methodology of village investigation. In particular, attempts were made to find answers to three questions: why do we investigate village life? What do we investigate? How do we investigate? The group then broke up into four teams and set out to four villages. This lasted for two weeks, and there were meetings of the full group in-between for discussion of the findings and for experience sharing. The important lessons learnt out of this exercise were the need to integrate with the community to obtain correct information on village life, and the need to use informal discussions and observations rather than conventional methods of questionnaires.

Having gone through the three steps described above over a period of one month the trainees spent the next two months in surveying selected regions in the country and collecting basic data about villages to select a suitable village cluster (a central village and four associated villages) to commence action research. Each team carried out preliminary investigations on about 30-40 villages before the final village cluster was selected. Fortnightly discussions among all four teams continued throughout this two-month period for experience sharing.

The entry of these external cadres into the village cluster marked the beginning of a continuing process of investigation. The first phase of this village investigation was the collection of basic data and information about the village. Information was collected through informal discussions, direct observation, cross checking by further discussions, visits to individual households and other such methods. Through these investigations, the teams were able to identify the poor groups and the general nature of their problems. Usually at this stage, the teams

² This has been taken from de Silva, GVS, Niranjana Mehta & Ponna Wignaraja: *Cadre Creation and Action*

established contacts with various village groups and involved them in further investigation work. However, depending on the nature of the village groups with whom the teams were working, the next phase differed among teams.

In March 1979, the CDTs visited India and Bangladesh to interact with the work of the Spearhead teams of the NIBM and of Proshika. On their return to Sri Lanka in April, the CDTs reflected together on their experiences and prepared a report summarising what they learnt.

Thereafter all the CDT teams were engaged in the identification of persons to be trained as village cadres (change agents). In all four locations, the persons so selected (25 persons from the five-village cluster) were youth of 20-30 years and with some formal education (completion of secondary school education). There was a preference for unemployed youth with formal education attainments. About two-thirds of the selected persons were females. The process of selection consisted of discussion and interaction with various village groups, and further probing through discussions when potential persons were identified.

The training programme for the change agents covered a period of approximately three months. This programme also started with an attempt by the participants to analyse their past experiences relating to village development and to arrive at generalisations. This was followed by a continuous process (three months) of village investigations, interspersed with weekly meetings of the entire group (change agents from all five villages in the cluster) for discussion of the findings, reflection and experience sharing. An important exercise that the change agents did was the calculation of the producer exploitation involved in commodity production. Deeper probing into concepts and Issues thrown up at the discussions (e.g. self-reliance, concept of development, participation), also formed part of the training session. Exchange of visits (a team from one village working with a team from another village) also formed a part of the training.

In an evaluation carried out by the CDTs nearly one year after the completion of this training programme, only 25 percent of the change agents were evaluated as satisfactory, another 25 percent were categorised as fair, and the balance of 50 per cent had either dropped out or were found to be unsatisfactory. Understanding of the new approach to development and the success shown in the translation of this approach into practice in the villages were the main criteria used in this evaluation. Two other experiences came out of this evaluation: (a) change agents with a higher level of formal education look for urban jobs; and (b) the best change agents came mostly from poor families and from among those involved in some work in the village (though not full-time work).

13. Training methods in India's Rural Action Project and Bangladesh's Proshika have been broadly similar to that in Sri Lanka's Research Council. In fact, close interaction with the former two initiatives had contributed to the latter's training programme. In contrast, PROJECT AID In the Philippines had a more conventionally structured training programme for its cadres, focussed on centralised lectures in community organisation, participatory research and planning. As will be discussed, the orientation of PROJECT AID was critically different from the general orientation of the other three initiatives, and converged with the latter only after interacting with them.

4. THE CRUCIAL FIRST STEP

Wrong Starts

14. The beginning is crucial and mistakes have been committed in each of the four Initiatives.
15. "Spearhead teams" of cadres in India's Rural Action Project motivated small farmers to set up farmers' service societies and wasted a year in getting these societies formally registered. Registration was held up due to no apparent reason. Sometimes even the intervention of influential people in the Government could not move the papers. With the

preoccupation with registration very little practical activity was started, and a sense of people's Initiative was lacking.

16. Teams of Proshika cadres undertook village investigations and identified some of the problems of the landless. They developed socio-economic projects (e.g. irrigation, vegetable farming, duck raising, fish culture) around these problems and started implementing them mechanically, without real involvement of the landless in them. Within four months it was clear that the projects were failing to achieve anything.
17. In Sri Lanka a team of development workers in the Change Agents Programme went to a fisherman's village, lived there, and obtained the co-operation of informal groups in the village to carry out a socio-economic investigation. The team analysed findings of the investigation with the informal groups, and identified three possible courses of action :
 - (a) Organisation of the fishermen to evolve a fish-marketing scheme to remove exploitation by traders;
 - (b) Promotion of a collective savings scheme among the fishermen to eliminate the need to borrow from traders on exploitative terms
 - (c) Organisation of women to enhance their participation in the fishing industry and promote other productive activities for women.
18. For a period of about one year the team worked with a number of village groups to initiate a development process along the above lines. But these efforts proved a failure. About 30 women formed themselves into a society which organised a pre-school in the village. But the project did not continue for more than three months. An attempt was made to revive the lace-making industry in the village as a part-time employment avenue for women, and that too did not prove to be a success. An official from a bank was invited to the village for a discussion on the banking facilities available to the fishermen, but no action emerged out of this discussion.

A group of youth involved in the fishing industry experimented with a system of marketing their fish directly to wholesalers bypassing the middlemen, but no new marketing scheme emerged out of this experimentation. Finally, a group savings scheme was started with the involvement of wives of the fishermen, but this too suffered the same fate as the earlier activities.

19. A coastal village chosen under PROJECT AID in the Philippines was a privately-owned hacienda with a tight control exercised by the hacienda's administrator on the lives of the workers. A "community facilitator" set out to work in this village but had to stay in the administrator's house to minimise suspicion of the administrator about her intentions. She was not able to do anything significant with the plantation workers who were not ready to confront the hacienda administration for fear of reprisals. Finding the structural condition too difficult there the community facilitator ultimately withdrew from the location.
20. In two other project areas community facilitators were able to enthruse groups of rural poor to form organisations by promising them economic projects with bank and other outside finance. Some project feasibility studies were also made and the reports submitted to offices in Manila. But nothing concrete materialised. Members of the newly formed organisations waited, then started losing motivation and dropped out of the organisations.

People's Self-inquiry

21. In each of the above cases there were joint critical review of the experiences by the cadres, and the mistakes were identified. In the Rural Action Project it was seen that while most of the efforts to link the rural poor with official projects and services by properly registering their organisations failed, there were isolated practical initiatives by the poor based on their own decisions and their own resources (see para 27) which were successful and promoted the self-esteem and self-confidence of the people to continue working collectively. This induced a change of design

of the Rural Action Project. The Spearhead teams were "retrained" through reorientation workshops, to work with the poor to develop informal people's organisations to undertake self-reliant programmes with minimum contact with official agencies. In both Proshika and the Change Agents Programme joint review of experiences by the cadres pin-pointed a direct relation between success in generating vibrant group action by the rural poor and the extent of direct participation of the rural poor in the village socio-economic investigation, analysis of the causes of their continuing poverty and search for ways to overcome poverty. In a village under PROJECT AID in the Philippines group action took off after visitors from Proshika and the Rural Action Project challenged the rural poor directly to do something to solve their problems themselves instead of waiting for others to do something for them. The people then deliberated themselves, and acted.

22. Together, these experiences of failures and successes converge into two clear lessons:

- the people are alienated from their own capabilities if they are asked or encouraged to follow ideas of others. Active participation or engagement is stimulated by self-inquiry and self-deliberation, and by having opportunities to initiate tasks identified by such inquiry and deliberation;
- it is risky to wait for official action to facilitate development of participatory people's processes. People should be encouraged to take initiatives of their own whose success does not rest critically on official support.

23. The crucial first task of the animator, cadre or facilitator is then precisely to stimulate collective self-inquiry by the people and a sense of self-reliance in them.

5. UNFOLDING

24. As the coordinator of PIDA has observed³, the interaction between the [animator] and the [rural poor] sparks off a certain chemistry – people initiate a process of scientific inquiry into their poverty. They move away from a sensory perception of their poverty and fatalistic beliefs about their poverty, to a conceptual and analytical framework for their deliberations, and begin to relate their poverty to the social environment around them.
25. Organised people's groups emerge logically from people's systematic social inquiry. Except in PROJECT AID/SARILAKAS, where the Bureau of Rural Workers registered these groups promptly as formal organisations of rural workers, these people's groups in the initiatives under review have not formed legal entities. In Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the legal framework for registration of rural workers as rural workers' organisations to freely pursue the interests of their members do not, in fact, exist. In any case, formal recognition has not been a pre-occupation in the people's organisations which have developed.

The Scope of People's Initiatives

26. It is typical of external designs, which originate in the thinking and jurisdiction of sectoral expertise, to want to see the people organise around sectoral activities. The people, however, live an organically linked multi-sectoral life, and left to themselves do not usually restrict the scope of their organisation to activities in limited areas. The scope of their collective work naturally becomes comprehensive, and the people initiate action in any area in which they consider that action will promote or protect their interests the most.
27. In the Rural Action Project, the rural poor started small consumer stores on a collective basis, goateries and joint cultivation. They improved drinking water ponds, stopped drinking and gambling and built huts for primary schools. In one village they challenged an oppressive landlord

³ *Ideas and Action*, No. 153,1983/5, p. 6.

who was usurping assets of the poor such as livestock, extracting free labour from the poor and molesting their women. Instances of such confrontations between poor and rural elites are many. In other places the people took steps to reduce exploitation by money lenders and middlemen, by building their own group saving funds and collective marketing arrangements.

28. In Proshika economic activities were also combined with "pressure group" activities ranging from wage-bargaining to militant mass confrontation with village elites and touts to redress economic and social oppression or to challenge affronts to human dignity (e.g. customary physical beating by an elite of a poor). In SARILAKAS, economic activities have been continued with or sometimes preceded by assertion of people's rights vis-a-vis both rural elites and government agency officials. Forest officials who were denying the rural workers their legal rights to forest land have been challenged; officials of the land reform ministry have been confronted for implementation of land lease rights; a court case has been brought against exploitation by a landlord and in the process court officials allegedly siding with landlords and adopting corrupt practice themselves have been challenged.
29. Only in Sri Lanka, where direct social oppression by rural elites on the rural poor has not been perceived to be as severe, has people's collective action concentrated more on tackling economic management tasks – specifically, collective marketing schemes by poor primary producers by-passing trading middlemen who had previously been appropriating the bulk of their marketable surplus.
30. This is one aspect of the unfolding process - the nature of direct action taken by the rural poor once they get organised, following collective self-inquiry.

Self-transformation

31. Usually, the stimulation the rural poor get from serious intellectual inquiry into their poverty situation motivates them to meet regularly - weekly, monthly or bi-monthly - for systematic reviews of their on-going experience from collective action and to take new decisions. An action - reflection rhythm is thereby generated, and the rural poor remain intellectually involved in their evolving experience. Without such intellectual involvement their interest in collective action would diminish, or they might become passive or mechanical participants in activities managed by office bearers and leaders of their organisation, or by external cadres. With intellectual Involvement, on the one other hand, and concretely with an evolving action-reflection rhythm, the people experience a progressive process of self-transformation not only in terms of gaining sectoral, benefits, but as total human beings. This, one would suggest, is what provides the cardinal stimulation to participate.
32. In fact, except in Sri Lanka, for many of the people's groups or for many individuals in the groups, economic benefits from organising and taking group action have not been spectacular. But this has not been a factor dampening the motivation of the rural poor in remaining engaged in collective deliberation and action. In this respect, a revealing insight was obtained in an evaluation exercise of SARILAKAS in 1982: individual numbers in organisations of the rural poor in four villages were separately asked what each considered to be his or her greatest gain from the project. Without a single exception, each replied that the greatest benefit was educational, and emphasised two aspects of this (1) acquiring knowledge of their legal rights as workers, and (2) acquiring the awareness, through the experience of their collective efforts, that these rights can be achieved only if they get organised. This came even from respondents who had in fact obtained considerable economic benefits from organised activities.

Replication and Linking

33. Such participatory processes get replicated spontaneously as has happened in most of the areas in the cases under review. There is no better stimulant to self-mobilisation of disadvantaged and oppressed peo-

ple than the concrete demonstration of people like themselves standing up as human beings through self-mobilisation.

34. Naturally, small village level groups linked up with each other within and across villages, either to form broader organisations or to coordinate or join hands in undertaking specific economic, social or political tasks of 'larger scales. Thus, village level small coir yarn producers' associations in Sri Lanka have federated into a broader organisation of seven villages to enhance their bargaining power vis-a-vis exporting firms; landless groups in Bangladesh villages have formed broader associations of landless at many levels, and mass mobilisation involving thousands of landless, belonging to Proshika groups are seen in confrontation with rural elites in cases of blatant oppression.

Responses of Animators

35. For the animators it continues to be a learning process whose un-folding could never have been designed or predicted. Their task in assisting the people's actions becomes determined by the nature of action the people choose to take - this has varied from organising needed skill training to the people, arranging bank or other sources of finance to support economic projects, assisting them in feasibility enquiries of projects under consideration, organising educational seminars, to finding legal help for the people in fighting court cases, advising them in dealing with police, and in finding support for the people in the higher echelons of power in their confrontations with local elites.
36. It has been the practice in all the initiatives for animators to continue to meet among themselves periodically for review and sharing of their experiences. The hardship of their work, the test of doing pure catalytic work in which fulfillment is to be sought in not establishing one's own image but in liquidating it, the hazards arising from confrontations with rural power groups, often the police, etc. and the opening up of softer job opportunities - all together contribute to a rather high rate of cadre drop

out, as high as 50 per cent in some cases. But new cadres join the work, some attracted by the challenge of the work itself, seeing that there can be a fulfilling role in dedicated work to help the oppressed, and some by the job opportunity in the work. A greater proportion of the "second generation" of cadres come from within the rural communities, mostly from among the rural youth.

37. It is a commitment in all the initiatives (in the Philippines, since SARILAKAS started) that dependence of the rural poor's groups on external cadres should be progressively reduced and eventually their continued presence in any area where they initiate people's action should not be required for continuation of people's mobilisation. Accordingly, external animators are in fact physically withdrawing from activated areas in some cases, with internal cadres (local "change agents") or leaders of the rural poor themselves taking over their functions, after periods of, typically, 2-3 years of work. In other cases external cadres have kept periodic contact with the people's groups, and provide specific services of a consultancy ('facilitation') nature in response to specific needs. In both cases the release of time of the external cadres has enabled them to initiate self-mobilisation of the rural poor in other areas, and this has been the other way the process has become multiplied.

Elite Response

38. Needless to say, the course of the processes have not been smooth. Organised action by the rural poor, stimulated by a critical understanding of the causes of their continued poverty and misery, is a threat to vested interests who have been exploiting and oppressing them taking advantage of their intellectual dependence and lack of organised strength. In most cases these vested interests have resisted the development of people's power and their collective efforts to break away from dependence on them. The history of each initiative is full of instances of attempted sabotage of people's collective efforts to improve their lives, by methods which have ranged from the civil to violent. There have been instances where the people have backtracked; others where they have overcome

designs and maneuvers of vested interests by their solidarity and determination: in some instances support from sympathetic officials of government organs has been handy. Collusion between rural vested interests and officials in police or other government organs has often worked the other way. Some animators as well as leaders of people's groups have been physically threatened. Typically, the work, thus, has needed a lot of political tact, courage and alliance with supporters in many quarters, to keep moving forward.

6. THE CATALYTIC AGENCY AND EXTERNAL SUPPORT

39. The sensitive nature of the work has had a profound implication for the catalytic agency and for external support, from national and international bureaucracies, to such work.
40. The Rural Action Project in India was launched by the NIBM, an autonomous national institution, thanks to the personal commitment to the rural poor of its then Director (Dr. Niranjana Mehta) and some members of its faculty. After a change of the Director the NIBM decided to stop the project, and the project leader (Subhchri Dasgupta) left the NIBM to create PIDT, an NGO, to continue the project three-and-a-half years after it started.
41. The Change Agents Programme of Sri Lanka started within the government, but its initiators soon realised that rigidities of government bureaucracy would inhibit its expansion, and in two years PIDA, an NGO, was created to continue with the work.
42. PROJECT AID and SARILAKAS also started within the government but soon after reorientation of the conception toward genuine people's participation through people's organised power, bureaucratic resistance to the project started developing, and eventually there was a move to tighten bureaucratic control of the project. PROCESS, an NGO, was then created to continue the work.

44. From the rather remarkably parallel experience in the first three cases the lesson is clear that, while it may be possible to launch small scale pilot experiments of this nature through government or semi-government agencies, typically non-government agencies are the more suitable to handle such work. This is hardly a surprising conclusion, given the well-known rigidities of bureaucratic operation, and it is perhaps to the bureaucracies' credit in the first instance that such unusual experimentation could at all have been started from there. Indeed, one lesson which emerges from the four experiences under review is that all governments are not monolithic organisations firmly wedded to the principle of "development from above," but that refreshingly imaginative quarters exist within some government bureaucracies either to initiate or to support action from below which challenges this principle. However it may be, the nature of the work concerned unquestionably makes government agencies typically unsuitable to handle it on a significant and sustained scale.
45. In turn, this also puts a limitation on the ability of intergovernmental agencies, and of those International donor agencies which channel their assistance chiefly through governments, to support such work.
46. It is desirable, in any case, that external support to such work be of a small-scale, if at all. National action groups are known to have been disoriented by massive external support, and not all the catalytic agencies whose work has been reviewed can be claimed to be totally immune from any such tendency.

7. Small Farmer Development Programme

47. Nepal's Small Farmer Development Programme launched in 1975-76 is well-known for the group activities of the rural poor which it has initiated. The conception and methodology of the programme differ in crucial aspects with the convergent conception and methodology of the four initiatives reviewed in the foregoing sections, and it is insightful to contrast these in relation to the nature of the evolving course of the S.F.D.P.

48. The SFDP, in a programme of the Agricultural Development Bank of Nepal (ADBN) which is an autonomous government agency, was conceived as the outcome of a series of field workshops in which ADBN and other government officials, both senior and junior, and small farmers and landless rural workers deliberated together on how problems of the rural poor could be tackled. These workshops were apparently not concerned with inquiry into the total social reality but focussed on economic and administrative bottlenecks to development, and zeroed in on credit and the government delivery system as the two critical areas where something new had to be done. An imaginative group-liability based credit scheme was conceived, for implementation by the ADBN. The ADBN was also to act as the liaison between the small farmer groups and government delivery agencies to ensure that the needed deliveries for undertaking projects against group-guaranteed credits would materialise. The key change agent in the programme is the "group organiser" (GO), an ADBN official, in charge of each SFDP project covering typically two panchayats in which any number of groups 20, 30, 40 - depending on the size of the population and motivation may be formed.
49. The SFDP has generated impressive group motivation among the rural poor in most programme areas, primarily to take loans and use them productively in individual or group projects chosen or approved by groups, with assistance from GOs when needed in assessing their feasibility. The economic benefit-cost ratio of the undertakings has been quite high on an average, and material conditions of most SFDP group is visibly improving. The credit-repayment record has been outstanding.
50. Besides the economic activities financed by bank credit, many groups are reducing wasteful uneconomical expenditures customary in the villages, and this is becoming a significant source of internal saving and resource mobilisation for development. Group saving schemes are compulsory and is serving as a social insurance in distress situations besides supplementing bank credit as a source of investment finance.

51. Some groups are asserting themselves politically in their panchayats, with group members being elected to panchayat seats and positions of office in village co-operatives.
52. In its own terms the record of SFDP is impressive, but it shows important differences from the other four initiatives. Firstly, the programme is focussed around bank credit and other external deliveries, which provide the *raison d'etre* of the group. Social awareness raising to promote organisational consciousness irrespective of the availability of external resources is not in the formal conception of the programme. It is pertinent to note that the programme, eight years after its birth, shows no sign of the SFDP groups linking with each other to form broader associations of the rural poor. Some groups in a few panchayats have joined hands to initiate joint economic projects as an inter-group activity rather than as an organisation formed to promote common interests through different activities.
53. The economic orientation of the SFDP groups is shared by the Sri Lankan Change Agents Programme and in the work of PIDA, but with two pertinent differences - firstly, small producers' groups in the Sri Lankan initiatives have not received any finance from outside nor any privileged deliveries of other government services, and are demonstrating truly impressive self-reliant development. In fact, the animators in the Sri Lankan work made it a point to communicate to the rural poor that they had not brought any government resources or services with them. Their method of work, after it crystallised through trial and error, was to animate the rural poor in undertaking collective inquiry of their own into the contradictions of their reality, and the rural poor identified, in most cases, the market system dominated by the trading middlemen as the principal contradiction. The process of self-inquiry apparently stimulated the people enough not to keep waiting for external resources and deliveries but to take self-reliant action immediately to tackle this contradiction.
54. Secondly, and perhaps related with the first, the external animators in the Sri Lankan work have withdrawn, systematically, typically within a

time-span of two years or so from each respective area, in almost copy-book fashion, without any setback to the on-going people's processes. In contrast, the GO in SFDP is firmly implanted in each project area, and appears as a rule to be the focus of activity of the SFDP groups.

55. From the above points of view the SFDP has built into it crucial elements of continued dependency of the rural poor on outsiders. As a corollary, development of effective awareness among the rural poor to form independent organisations with comprehensive scope cannot be expected from such initiative, and such development has indeed not been evident.

56. It is interesting to note that the above questions were discussed in an ESCAP-sponsored meeting in 1983 between representatives of all the initiatives under review, including the SFDP⁴. In this meeting PIDA and Proshika reported that they too had initially used credit to stimulate group activity, but de-emphasised credit later after seeing its negative effects. A report on this meeting mentions the negative effects that were discussed, as the following⁵.
 - (i) the availability of external credit disorients the groups; it changes their orientation. Instead of searching for ways and means to mobilise or generate financial resources by their own efforts, the farmers tend to make themselves dependent, as a group or as individuals, on the credit facilities offered by the bank or the project;

 - (ii) credit easily pollutes the relationship between the fieldworker and the groups requesting credit. Fieldworkers are brought into a position where they can facilitate or obstruct access to credit. It gives them power over the groups and their members and they may be tempted to impose their own ideas and priorities on group members instead of engaging in a sincere dialogue. The fieldworker's involvement in the

⁴ Consultative Meeting on Inter-country Action Research on Participatory Rural Development, Chainet, Thailand, 23-26 February 1983.

⁵ Koenraad Verhden, Co-operation for Survival: An Analysis of an Experiment in Participatory Research and Planning with Small Farmers in Sri Lanka and Thailand, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, 1984.

supervision of use of credit and in loan collection compromises his/her role as a catalytic agent and advisor for self-reliant development;

(iii) a great deal of the fieldworkers' time and energy which otherwise could be devoted to stimulating group organisation and action, is consumed by the administration of agricultural credit: completing forms, discussions and negotiations with bank officers, disbursement operations, policing the use of credit, loan collection and settlement of repayment problems. In fact, they tend to become loan officers rather than development workers;

(iv) the availability of credit facilities easily pushes groups to undertake activities on a scale where they become unable to manage the operations themselves;

(v) even where activities are undertaken on a small scale, experience would suggest that where bank officials play an important role in group organisation (SFDP, Nepal) the phasing out of external assistance, both technical and financial, has become problematic.

57. The point in the above view was not to deny to the rural poor their legitimate share of institutional credit but to question the desirability of using such credit as the "entry point" for the development of organisations of the rural poor. The contention was that such an entry point makes credit the chief motivation for organising, impeding the development of an awareness among the rural poor that they need to organise in any case, in order to achieve many of their rights in society from which they are deprived, and, through co-operation, to handle many of their problems which they cannot tackle individually. The way for them to obtain credit should be not as a privilege in special programmes which may detract them from developing the needed 'militancy' to assert their legitimate rights, but to get organised as pressure groups, assert their right to credit, and demand this and other resources and deliveries from public institutions.

58. The distinction between credit for the rural poor as a "privilege" and that as a right to be achieved through organised grass-roots pressure, as this was articulated in the above meeting, perhaps sums up the essence of the distinction between a "delivery-oriented" approach to grass-roots organising work and an "empowerment" approach. The delivery-oriented approach is safer from the point of view of stability of the status quo, while the empowerment approach envisages some form of social change through interaction between the status quo and an emerging organised force of the underprivileged. The World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD, Rome, July 1979) subscribed to the empowerment approach when it related people's participation with the need "for realignment of political power in favour of disadvantaged groups and for social and economic development". However, the delivery-oriented approach remains popular among many national and international agencies, and the latter also understandably find this easier. In terms of negotiating with concerned governments. It is also difficult to argue against rural development projects which are designed to directly bring resources to the hitherto deprived and to stimulate the formation of grass-roots organisations for effective use of these resources, even though these may contain the possibility of retarding the process of development of strong and independent pressure-group organisations of the deprived. PORP is facing this dilemma in its work which the above meeting brought to a sharp focus: while it has been impressed by the extent of group co-operation in Nepal's SFDP, it is not clear whether the SFDP groups can develop into truly independent organisations of small farmers, or whether such development may actually be hindered by the SFDP programme itself.
59. In practice, choice between the two kinds of initiatives would in some cases be determined by the competence or jurisdiction of the initiating agency concerned; in other cases and more fundamentally, this would be a matter of development 'ideology'.

8. CONCLUSION

60. Some of the key insights which emerge from the foregoing are :

1. Catalytic action to promote participation of the rural poor in development is best initiated by non-government agencies.
2. The training of cadres is inseparable from action. The training includes social education into the village reality - its contradictions - and links of this reality with higher-level macro structures. The training process continues in an action-joint-reflection sequence, and cadre conduct becomes continuously adjusted to the unfolding response of the rural poor and of the elites.
3. Cadre-dropouts are common, while new cadres become attracted to the work, particularly from within the rural sector.
4. People are most stimulated to self-mobilise, if they participate in the intellectual inquiry of the causes of their poverty and of the socio-economic structures and processes by which they are exploited and oppressed.
5. Once stimulated to self-mobilise, people's collective action is not necessarily confined to incremental income and employment raising activities but varies widely in scope, depending on local conditions, culture and urges. Tasks to which the people have given priorities, singly or jointly, in different situations are, broadly -
 - economic undertakings - individual and/or collective
 - resistance to exploitation and social oppression
 - assertion of rights - legal and human ;
 - reduction of wasteful social expenditures - social security schemes.
6. It cannot be predicted beforehand in which direction people's self-deliberated action will evolve. "Participation-promotion projects" should, therefore, be typically opposed to any

rigid "activities" and "output" oriented project designs which would inhibit rather than liberate people's creative energies.

7. The work is hazardous. People's "power" and the direction it takes from rational self-deliberation, threaten vested interests who often try to resist. Latent conflicts thereby may get activated. In their turn the people now resist exploitation, oppression and violence upon them with greater critical awareness and solidarity. The result is a move towards a more balanced distribution of social power.

61. Such processes should be welcome to any enlightened national leadership which wishes to see mass poverty and oppression eliminated. Unfortunately, in practice such enlightened leadership is rare, so that the kind of initiative which has been reviewed is confined to a few developing countries only, and even there it is nowhere near making a dent in the national map. Ultimately, the contribution of this kind of initiative may not be quantitative but qualitative, by demonstrating a culture of people's participation, based on people's intellectual self-inquiry and a collective action-reflection-rhythm, which hopefully may influence the culture of broader social forces in whose hands the direction of macro-level social change may lie.

ANNEX

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

The experiences reviewed in this paper point to the crucial role of intellectual self-inquiry of the rural poor in stimulating them into collective action and arming them with scientific knowledge of their own in their struggle against poverty and exploitation. Initiation by external researchers of such inquiry has come to be known as "participatory research".

2. The methodology of work in the different Asian experiences which have been discussed includes elements of participatory research whose

methodology is evolving through spontaneous practice by participatory researchers and activist groups. A recent ILO project in three countries in Latin America - Colombia, Mexico and Nicaragua - sought to elaborate this methodology systematically with activists and peasant communities, resulting in possibly the first comprehensive methodological guidance in such work (Fals Borda 1985:85-97). The key elements of this are as follows⁶

(a) Data Gathering and Validation

Socio-economic data are collected by the poor community through team visits to households, and in group or community events such as meetings, assemblies, committees, etc. through collective interchange and discussion. In this collective and dialogical manner data are obtained which may be immediately corrected or verified in the same process as its collection, or validated in community gatherings convened for this purpose. This social validation gives the needed objectivity to the data required in scientific research.

(b) Critical Recovery of History

The community inquires about its past history in the context of the broad history of the country, and seeks to selectively discover those elements and social forces of the past which were useful to defend the interests of the underprivileged and exploited classes, elements which could be recovered in order to feed present-day effort to improve their conditions. Techniques found useful for this purpose are: oral tradition and storytelling; elders' testimonies; family-trunk archives and depositories; ideological projection, imputation and other expressions of collective memory. In this way popular heroes of past days are rediscovered, data and facts are presented which may correct, supplement and clarify official or academic accounts written with other interests in mind; and completely new in-

⁶ This has been based on a synthesising report on the project by its co-ordinator Orlando Fals-Borda: *Knowledge and People's Power. Lessons with Peasants in Nicaragua, Mexico and Colombia*. Indian social Institute. New Delhi. 1985.

formation is obtained for regional or national history, for the purpose of upholding the interest of the underprivileged.

(c) **Valuing and Using Popular Culture**

The essential or core values of the ordinary people in each region are recognised, to enhance popular self-mobilisation. This technique incorporates important cultural elements often forgotten or discarded, in elite political practices, such as music, sport, beliefs, myths, folk tales and other expressions related to popular sentiment, imagination and similar tendencies.

(d) **Production and Diffusion of New Knowledge**

This technique is not seen as distinct from the research procedure as such because it is an integral part of the feedback and validation procedures of participatory research. It recognises an intellectual division of labour between and within base groups. Although participatory research strives to end the monopoly and domination of the written or printed word (as a rule, an elitist trait), practice has shown the importance of systematising new data and knowledge according to the level of critical awareness and ability for understanding written, auditive, and visual messages by different sections of the people.

From this point of view four broad levels of communication are identified:

- (i) when the information and systematised knowledge is addressed to "pre-literate" peoples. The means of communication in this case is predominantly audio-visual - e.g. "talking maps." social trees," etc. ;
- (ii) when the material is addressed to semi-literate people., who may be reached by such means as illustrated booklets;
- (iii) for middle range leaders and cadres, through more elaborate treatises;

(iv) for advanced cadres and intellectuals, through essays, conceptual and theoretical books.

Other forms of communication are based on holistic or intentional language such as image, sound, painting, mimesis, body gestures, photographs, etc. Also, there are material forms for returning systematic knowledge developed by or with the people to the people, such as in the organisation of co-operatives, shops, training centers, action teams, etc., considered as applied results of research.

3. Participatory research does not reject a flexible use of other practices for information gathering from the sociological and anthropological tradition such as open interview, survey, systematic observation, field diary, data files, cartography, primary and secondary source materials.

Skilled participatory researchers would not only know how to handle these conventional techniques but also be able to popularise them in the simple, direct ways at as many of the above levels as possible.

4. Participatory research considers it to be a right of the communities from which information is gathered that the systematised knowledge developed by and with them be returned to them, to be used by them in their collective endeavour for self-development. In publishing the results of such research for a wider public it is important to consider that no information is published if this might prejudice the interests of the communities concerned with whom, at least, the question should be cleared.

*First published in the *Journal of Rural Development & Administration*, Pakistan Academy for Rural Development Peshawar, XVII (1&2). Winter-Spring 1985: 1-22.