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Rural Development in Pakistan: Issues and Future Strategies

Asif Maqbool¹ and Muhammad Khalid Bashir²

Abstract

Pakistan is basically an agricultural country. Agriculture is the largest sector in the economy contributing 21 percent of the GDP and providing 70% of the total value of exports. The sector at present employs 17 million workers, representing 44% of the country's labour force. About 67 % of population resides in rural areas. The major sources of their earnings are agriculture and other small-scale rural enterprises, which directly or indirectly depend on agriculture. Many of the rural poor live in areas where arable land is scarce, agriculture potential is low; drought and environmental degradation are common features. Moreover access to basic human needs i.e. basic human rights such as potable water and sanitation, education and healthcare are far less available in rural areas. The problems of malnutrition, low life expectancy and high infant mortality are more prevalent in rural areas.

It is argued that sustainable agriculture is the main vehicle for rural development and the rural development will not take place unless we view rural more than farmers. We need to value them as contributor to the employment, manager of rural landscape and environmental steward in protecting and upgrading the ecosystem and setting social and cultural order and above all supplier of safe high quality products to consumers. Successful rural community development calls for an integrated and comprehensive approach.

Keywords: agriculture, problems and issues, Policies and institutions, Community development.

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Introduction

The concept of rural development has changed significantly during the last three decades. Until the 1970s, rural development was synonymous with agricultural development and, hence, focused on increasing agricultural production. Today's concept of rural development concerns not only with improvements in growth, income, and output but it also includes an assessment of changes in the quality of life, such as improvement in health and nutrition, education, environmentally safe living conditions, and reduction in gender and income inequalities.

Agriculture and Pakistan's Economy

Agriculture remains the hub of Pakistan's economy, which consists of crops and livestock products. It directly contributes 25% to GDP and provides employment to 44 percent of the total labour force of the country and accounts for nearly 65% of the country's export earnings. Agriculture alone is responsible for about 67% of our foreign exchange earning directly or indirectly (GOP, 2008). Moreover, this sector provides raw material to domestic agro-based industries such as sugar, vegetable, leather, and textiles. Hence, the importance of agriculture to the economic growth of Pakistan and the well being of its people cannot be overstated.

Most importantly, 67 percent of country's population living in rural areas is directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood (GOP, 2008). The agriculture sector is, thus a major determinant of the overall economic growth and well-being in Pakistan. In addition to the direct impact of agriculture growth on poverty reduction, there is also a much larger indirect effect through the linkages between agriculture and non-farm growth in rural areas. Non-farm growth is closely linked with agricultural growth since peasant farmers spend a large portion of their incremental income on locally produced non-agricultural goods thus generating employment and incomes in the adjoining areas. The increased demand for non-farm goods leads to a much larger increase in employment, which could be a key vehicle for poverty reduction.

Issues of Rural Sector

Rural scenario can generally be characterized as follows:

1. Rural development policy always had a heavy bias towards large farmers, whereas small landholders making more than 90 percent of total farms were ignored along with landless labor community.

2. Rigid cropping pattern prevailing in the country results in lack of intensification and diversification of agriculture sector, thereby increasing unemployment in rural areas.
3. Natural resource base is deteriorating overtime. Due to inappropriate agricultural practices and climate change, land degradation is more and land productivity is declining. Almost 40 percent of land in Sindh alone has turned saline. The rangelands on which 70 percent of local livestock thrives have been degraded and no rehabilitation plans are in place (Baig and Khan, 2006).
4. Literacy rate is very low in these areas and illiterate farmers cannot realize the benefits of modern, scientific and technical know-how in farming business. Moreover, rural areas are deprived of schools. In case, if schooling facilities are available, then qualified staff is not available. Basic health care is the prime need of every individual. Unfortunately, this component is totally ignored by the Govt. Most villages in Pakistan still are lacking in hospitals, dispensaries and other health centers. According to an estimate 70-80 million people do not have requisite access to education and health services (Pirzada, 1999).
5. Poor health, malnutrition and high population growth rates are widespread in rural areas, badly affecting productivity. According to an estimate, 30-50 million people are malnourished (Pirzada, 1999).
6. Water supply and sanitation condition is not satisfactory in rural areas. Population having access to safe water is 87 percent and 35 percent of total population has access to sanitation (ADB, 2005).
7. Appropriate facilities for healthy activities are not available in rural areas. So, the frustrated young people indulge in obnoxious activities such as drug addiction, rape, robbery, murder, etc.

Past Rural Development Programmes in Pakistan

Since its independence, Pakistan has embarked upon a number of rural and agricultural development programmes to increase the productivity and quality of life of rural people. These programmes were Village Aid Programme, Basic Democracies system, Rural Works Programme, Integrated Rural Development, Peoples Works Programme, Local Govt. and Rural Development, Peoples Programme, Tameer-e-Watan, Social Action Programmes, Khushal Pakistan, Tameer-e-Pakistan and Khushal Pakistan Programme-1. These programmes were partially or fully

extended to all parts of the country. The overall objectives of these programmes were the social welfare, improvement in quality of life and agricultural development. These programmes did not achieve the desired results because the objectives of one programme conflicted with those of others, and there was no institutional mechanism for reconciling them. Consequently, many programmes not only failed to produce the intended benefits, but also caused harm to other programmes.

Common causes of failure of these programmes were loose and uncoordinated institutional framework; lack of mutual understanding and collaboration within the nation-building departments and with the departments of rural development; absence of efforts to help evolve rural leadership from the grass roots; lack of proper supervision, follow-up, research and evaluation of projects.

Conclusions

Pakistan had a very long history of Government intervention in the rural sector, with a view to improve the socio-economic condition of rural people, especially the poor. However, there is no comprehensive integrated national policy for agricultural and rural development yet declared and adopted by the Government. What is, therefore, needed is a long-term comprehensive integrated national policy, which clearly charts the future course of agricultural and rural development in the country in the twenty-first century. This is all the more necessary in the wake of new economic policy characterized by liberalization, privatization and globalization of Pakistan's economy.

Future Strategies

To develop rural community to become active participants of the economy, the following steps needs to be prioritized:

1. The rural poor (small landholders and landless class) need to participate in the development and implementation of the relevant policies and programs. It requires institutional and technological reforms.
2. For sustainable rural development, conservation and development of natural resources, focusing on protection of environment and biodiversity must be undertaken.

3. Strengthening rural institutions in the country can satisfy the thrust for rural development. There is a need to address the issues of inequality in terms of resources along with the innovation and adoption of cost saving technologies.
4. There is a strong need to develop and promote agro-based industry in rural areas to create employment opportunities through private-public interventions. This will definitely help in reducing the rural urban migration on one hand and rural poverty on the other. It could be achieved by promoting savings in rural areas, thereby increasing investment opportunities for overall improvement in the income of the rural communities.
5. Proper monitoring and evaluation of rural development programmes must be carried out to ensure successful implementation of programme activities and those who are responsible for not achieving the results must be accounted for.
6. Initiatives must be taken to address the problems of public health and education for fast growing population. This demand for establishment of schools and health facilities on modern lines. Such facilities would provide productive, healthy and educated labour force to agriculture in particular and to the economy in general.

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