

India

Indian Ocean

Sri Lanka

Colombo



IFAD photo by Giuseppe Bizzarri

Women tea pickers stand in line to be paid for their harvest at a tea processing plant in the Kandy district. Tea, along with rubber and coconuts accounts for almost 41 percent of export earnings.

Beyond the framework

The challenge for rural poverty reduction

Sri Lanka today

Providing the means by which poor people can organise themselves into groups, mobilise and pool resources, and develop the relevant skills to put ideas and plans into action, is key to overcoming poverty. In organising their own groups, marginalised people can acquire the confidence, the know-how, and power to support and manage their livelihoods and initiate change. Organisation is a prerequisite for participation but existing institutions in Sri Lanka are not adequately equipped to organise the poor and move them out of poverty.

The incidence of poverty in Sri Lanka is estimated at between one fifth and one third of the population. Non-development expenditure is rising, agricultural and human development lag behind the other sectors and devolution is being thwarted by a centre-province duality of power. Sri Lanka, in collaboration with Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan, initiated the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation in 1992, affirming in their report, *Meeting the Challenge*, the pivotal role that social mobilisation should play in alleviating poverty. *Meeting the Challenge* was adopted by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in 1993 and most Integrated Rural Development Projects include social mobilisation components. Policy makers, however, seem either to have abandoned social mobilisation or assigned it to agencies lacking the resources and scope to deal with organising the poor.

The Sri Lankan government has renewed its commitment to poverty alleviation and bringing decision-making closer to the poor. The Framework for Poverty Reduction, finalised in November 2000, speaks of the need for a collaborative approach to community-led development between poor people, local government, the private sector, and non-governmental organisations. Developed in consultation with civil society and donors, the framework represents national consensus on poverty reduction and recognises that effective organisation and mobilisation of poor people are pre-requisites for their effective participation in the development process, and ultimately their empowerment.

The challenge

Social mobilisation aims to create locally-managed, democratic organisations responsible for community development. Essential ingredients include: committed and credible local leaders, genuine participation, shared decision-making, accountability, and transparency. What is the best way to achieve social mobilisation and participation in Sri Lanka? How successful have key institutions been at mobilising the rural poor, asks IFAD in evaluating its 20-year co-operation with Sri Lanka. Given the large number of rural organisations in the country, is there a need for a different approach, or indeed for a new organisation devoted entirely to poverty alleviation?

A sustainable and effective mechanism providing support for social mobilisation is the key to rural poverty alleviation in Sri Lanka. Although IFAD-supported projects aim to promote empowerment and participation, most government agencies and local NGOs have specific sectoral mandates and cannot respond in an integrated manner or on a large enough scale. Community-level involvement in planning and decision making is marginal: as many as 80 percent of farmer organisations are inactive. Evaluating the Sri Lanka Country Programme, IFAD found that government agencies engaged in project implementation concentrate on service delivery rather than on participation and empowerment: community organisations are seen as the lowest tier of development administration.

Institutions each have their own comparative advantage in addressing the different aspects of rural poverty but none are effective in tackling social mobilisation in an integrated, holistic manner:



IFAD photo by Giuseppe Bizzarri

A woman weaves cloth on a hand loom in Tabbowa Nathandiya. She took out a loan to start a weaving business through the Small Farmers and Landless Credit Project.

- Agencies such as the then Ministry of Plan Implementation and the line departments (IFAD's main partners) are well suited for service delivery but are not oriented towards mobilising people for rural poverty reduction or for linking them to other government organisations, banks and markets.
- Sri Lankan NGOs lack the necessary resources to address rural poverty alleviation on a large scale. Many NGOs certainly have useful expertise but cannot link community participation to the diverse areas of interest across a community.
- Some commercial banks and microfinance institutions have achieved broad-based community outreach in providing support for rural poverty alleviation. They have not yet, however, been able to build and sustain social and physical capital for broad-based development on the scale required, even in the poorest provinces.
- The 'project' approach is narrow, limited, and short-term: government agencies engaged in project implementation are limited to specific sectors and interventions, and only to a small proportion of the poor population. Only a long-term, holistic, sector- and institution-wide approach to rural poverty reduction would begin to be sustainable.

Unlike the Saemaul Undong Movement in South Korea, farmer associations in Taiwan and Japan, and Rural Support Programmes - autonomous support mechanisms in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and India - Sri Lanka's only experience with a large-scale social investment fund, the Janasaviya Trust Fund, was not as successful as it might have been. The government had majority control and decision-making became politicised. This has also been the experience of government-managed social investment funds in general.

The Proposal

Alliances into which the poor enter on their own are often unequal. Would poor people benefit more if their alliances with politicians, public and private sector agencies, and microfinance institutions were secured with the involvement of an 'honest broker', an autonomous support mechanism, which would encourage the poor to organise themselves into groups and forge links with outsiders? Participants at the national Country Programme Evaluation workshop in Sri Lanka in 2001 recommended the establishment, on a pilot basis and covering at least one province, of a self-governing, not-for-profit body to help organise the poor, promote participation, and ultimately strive for their empowerment and for rural poverty alleviation. Management would be strictly professional, its board to include some government officials (as a minority) and others known to be politically neutral and committed to development.

Rural Support Programmes in South Asia enjoy support from the highest levels of government but their corporate governance is autonomous of the government. In Sri Lanka, the support mechanism could be established as a private company limited by guarantee. An endowment fund would cover recurrent costs - contributed by the government and donors. Government ownership, autonomy and professionalism would facilitate donor support and responsiveness to the community across a wide range of sectors and districts.

For an autonomous support mechanism to succeed in achieving social mobilisation and community participation in Sri Lanka, several conditions need to be met right from the start:

- **Strong government** commitment, rather than majority control, will make or break it. Partnership with the ministries responsible for finance, planning and rural development is essential.
- **Government commitment** and support also needs to be long term and non-partisan.
- **In addition** to minority government representation, the board of directors should consist of non-political, well-regarded professional individuals of standing and involved in development.
- **The management** and staff of such a support mechanism must command respect and be sensitive to the most deprived groups, to gender, religion and ethnicity, and neutral in terms of politics.

Further information

Evaluation *Insights* are produced by the IFAD Office of Evaluation and Studies and aim to provide concise, up-to-date reflection on key issues arising from IFAD evaluations. This first issue is based on the *Sri Lanka Country Programme Evaluation 2001* Report No. 1239 LK, available on line at: www.ifad.org/list_eval.asp. Evaluation *Insights* are also available from the Office of Evaluation and Studies, International Fund for Agricultural Development, Via del Serafico 107, Rome 00124, Italy. Tel +39 06 5459 2048; Fax +39 06 5043 463; Email m.keating@ifad.org.