

# Common Problems Faced by Rural Poor Organizations in the Post-Project Period

**R**ural Poor Organizations (RPOs) struggling to function and survive on their own in the post-project period face a number of common problems. What follows is a list of such problems that was drawn up following an e-discussion on RPO sustainability supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development through its Knowledge Networking for Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific Region (ENRAP) Program, and convened and moderated by ANGOC from 26 February to 16 April 2007<sup>1</sup>.

## 1. LACK OF EXIT/HANDING OVER STRATEGIES

■ Inadequate and frequently belated provisions for an exit/handing over strategy constitute a major obstacle to efforts to promote the sustainability of RPOs.

An exit or handing over strategy anticipates the needs of the RPO in the immediate post-project period and provides for a plan to meet such needs, including how to pay for them. Unfortunately, few RPOs emerging from the project cloister are armed with such provisions.

■ To be effective, an exit/handing over strategy has to be defined in the project design or as early on in the project as possible, and be formulated with the involvement of the agencies that are expected to be part of the post-project support mechanism. Corresponding budget allocations must also be provided for the various components of such exit/handing over strategies.

■ Other components of an exit/handing over strategy are as follows:

i. Adequate incentive systems to build and maintain organizational capacities, including

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<sup>1</sup> Over 300 participants of ENRAP, representing a variety of IFAD partners and institutions involved in IFAD projects, along with international and local government and non-government organizations, signed up for this e-discussion. A record of this e-discussion may be found at <http://www.enrap.org>.

assisting RPOs to generate their own resources and thereby sustain themselves;

ii. Efforts to get governments to adopt policies that are favorable to RPOs and to support these RPOs after the project period.

## **2. ILL-PREPAREDNESS OF RPOs FOR THE POST-PROJECT PERIOD**

Most assessments of RPOs that have been weaned from project support invariably find these groups ill-prepared to take on many of the tasks and responsibilities of an independent organization. This is the result of a tendency to use RPOs as mere conduits for project benefits and resources.

Extending the project timeframe has often been touted as a solution, along with augmenting the capacity-building component of projects. However, a number of factors ought to be considered if such modifications are to have the desired effect. These are as follows:

■ Capacity-building among the poorest of the poor, which constitutes a large number of RPOs formed, takes longer than generally programmed for. Low literacy levels among this sector are a big part of the problem. Community organizers have also observed that capacity-building among the poorest of the poor entails a process that goes beyond mere transfer of technology or skills. Rather, it emphasizes aspects of institution-building.

■ Capacity-building among women, especially in the case of women-constituted RPOs, is hindered by societal constraints on women's participation in activities outside the home. Domestic duties take precedence over project-related work. Furthermore, in many societies, the idea of women being preoccupied with non-domestic concerns is still frowned upon. In some Muslim communities, for instance, women's involvement in projects has been denounced as "unIslamic".

■ RPOs have been observed to regress in their performance from time to time and for reasons not completely accounted for. If this backsliding happens within the project period, despite project support and oversight, what more once all external assistance ceases.

■ The frequent turn-over of project staff has also been observed to undermine the effectivity of capacity-building efforts during the project period.

## **3. LACK OF FOLLOW-UP SUPPORT**

■ Another part of capacity-building is the provision of some degree of external follow-up support. It may seem a contradiction to say that the sustainability of an organization is greatly helped by continuing external facilitation. After all, isn't it a hallmark of sustainability that a group is able to go it alone without outside help?

However, in regard to certain types of organizations, some agencies are lately realizing that most groups can only go so far without some form of external support.<sup>2</sup>

■ Newly independent RPOs have recourse to at least four types of “support mechanism”:

i. A government agency, which takes on the role of “executing agency” at the end of the project. The problem with this arrangement springs from government agencies’ general unfamiliarity with participatory processes that should underlie collaborative relations with RPOs.

ii. Where NGOs or a core team of facilitators are given the task of “staying behind”, the question remains as to how these support providers would be compensated for their efforts.

iii. Where volunteers / organizers / activists residing in the community have been trained to do the follow-up facilitation work, there is a greater likelihood of persistence in the task, but these would need to be supported to some degree.

iv. Institutions formed and managed by RPOs themselves appear to be the most viable option. An example of such institutions are the Community Managed Resource Centers put up by the NGO partner, MYRADA. Self-

Help Groups (SHGs) contract services (e.g., training, marketing, audit, etc.) from such resource centers for a fee.

■ Possible sources of funding for post-project facilitation are contributions from RPOs (in the form of fees for services), government, corporate, and other donors.

#### 4. UNFAVORABLE POLICY FRAMEWORK

■ It is sometimes taken for granted that governments would be supportive of the continued development of RPOs. While most democratically elected governments may not actively hinder, if not promote, the activities of RPOs at the start, they have been known to change their minds once the RPO begins to demand reforms.

In non-democratic regimes, the situation simply does not support such optimism.

#### **Is a Legal Personality Indispensable to Rural Poor Organizations?**

SHGs may have no need to secure a legal personality or identity at its inception or even in the early years of its life. Besides the difficulty and expense involved in the process of registration, being registered itself entails compliance with a host of other legal requirements, which could hamper rather than aid the development of the fledgling group.

<sup>2</sup> Lockwood, Harold (2003). “Post-Project Sustainability: Follow-up Support to Communities (Literature Review and Desk Review of RWSS Project Documents). <http://www.trend.watsan.net/page/437>

■ Where the political environment is favorable, other obstacles may still impede the RPO's growth. For instance, small SHGs find themselves cut off from formal sources of credit, especially banks, because they have not complied with certain government requirements (such as legal registration) or because of the lack of collateral for a loan.

## 5. THE HURDLES OF SCALING UP

■ Scaling up, or seeking membership in coalitions, federations, or networks, could help enhance the sustainability of RPOs because doing so generally increases a group's bargaining power with institutions from which it can access resources, including credit, information and technical assistance. It could also help to bring about changes (i.e., policy/institutional reforms, concessions from a local government unit) that are favorable to the development of the RPO.

■ However, the advantages of scaling up may be offset by the problems that come with it. Larger numbers pose a bigger management problem, tending to make operations unwieldy and resulting in deterioration in the quality of the service provided. Leaders of RPOs, not to mention their staff, are also often ill-prepared (e.g., in terms of education) for their new tasks and roles as leaders/members of a larger group.

■ Capacity-building is therefore indispensable to the formation of federations, coalitions and networks. Capacity-building towards

the formation of federations and coalitions should focus on the following:

- i. Transition from membership in an unaffiliated RPO towards membership in a coalition/federation/network;
- ii. Preparedness of the RPO to take on its changing/evolving role/s as member of a coalition/federation/network;
- iii. Management of coalitions, federations and networks, as opposed to that of unaffiliated RPOs;
- iv. Strengthening of RPOs to ensure their autonomy from its federation/coalition/network partners;
- v. Management and resolution of conflict. □

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## REFERENCES:

E-discussion on RPO sustainability supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development through its Knowledge Networking for Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific Region (ENRAP) Program, and convened and moderated by ANGOC from 26 February to 16 April 2007. (A record of this e-discussion may be found at <http://www.enrap.org>).

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