

ASIAN NGO INITIATIVES IN PEOPLE-CENTERED DEVELOPMENT

Emergence of the NGO Sector in Asia

The voluntary sector has played a key role in the history and development of most Asian countries. But non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as we know them now are of more recent origin, and have developed in their own unique cultural, political and economic contexts.

A long history of nationalist and socialist movements, agrarian struggles and religious influence played key roles in shaping the NGO sectors in India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. In Nepal and

Thailand, indigenous self-help village societies emerged in the context of the relative isolation of villages and the absence or weak control of an external colonial power. But it was the entry of foreign-based NGOs that influenced the development of the NGO sectors in Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The Bangladesh NGO sector grew in the

1970s, due to the massive relief and rehabilitation efforts and resources poured in by the international community following the 1971 post-war independence.

In terms of their relative numbers, scope of activities and overall influence on development activities, the NGO sector is weak in Malaysia and Pakistan, relatively strong in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal and Sri Lanka, and very strong in India and the Philippines. It is difficult to determine the number of NGOs in each country due to the lack of comprehensive data, legal restrictions on registration and the absence of common definitions. Nevertheless, there are some indicative figures.

Table 1: NGOs in Selected Asian Countries

Country	Number	Comments
Bangladesh	12,000	Groups registered with the Ministry of Social Welfare in 1988; includes all private, non-business organizations.
India	--	No figures available, although studies cite "at least a hundred thousand" voluntary associations (referring to both NGOs and People's Organizations)
Indonesia	500 to 1,000	Estimate of development NGOs.
Malaysia	100	Estimated number of development NGOs, but excluding social clubs, credit societies, welfare associations, etc.
Nepal	750	Conservative estimate of development NGOs, 1994.
Pakistan	--	No estimates available.
Philippines	18,000	Estimate of all registered non-profit organizations by the National Economic Development Authority, 1988.
	2,000	Estimate of development-oriented NGOs by CODE-NGO, 1993.
Sri Lanka	200	Estimate of development-oriented NGOs having national NGO network linkages, computed from ANGOC listings, 1994.
Thailand	--	No estimates available.

(Sources: Quizon 1990, Singh 1990, Huda 1990, Kean and Singh 1990, Bokhari 1990, Riker 1990, PACT 1993, Fonseka 1990)

It is difficult to generalize about the different types of NGOs in the nine countries. There are a number of possible typologies, e.g., according to composition (self-help groups vs. self-help promoters); scope of operations (local, regional, national networks, international organizations); target sectors (rural development, fisheries, environment, etc.); and size (small, medium, large).

In addition, there is a growing trend of integration within the NGO sector, both vertically and horizontally, through numerous umbrella networks organized along common issues (agrarian reform, anti-pollution), area-based linkages (provincial, upazila, state), sectoral involvements (environment, consumer activities) or sectoral compositions (private foundations, church and religious groups, university-based organizations). Networking structures tend to be loose, based on voluntary cooperation and around identified common needs, i.e., to share information, to build solidarity around mutual problems or concerns or for mutual protection against perceived external threats. Within networks, individual NGOs maintain their own identity and independence; decisions are arrived at mainly through consensus.

The rise of people's movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly during the 1980s when NGOs became significant actors in national development, is a clear indicator of the limited capacity of the civil bureaucracy to respond to social issues and to provide basic services. NGOs have displayed their capacity to reach communities through informal, flexible, innovative and cost-effective approaches and have shown action-oriented results and new concepts that have found socio-political space at the macro and micro levels. Development activities ranged from personal and consumer-directed campaigns, such as campaigns on nutrition and food safety, to global campaigns such as the protection of plant genetic resources.

But most NGO activities focus ultimately on providing direct assistance or support for the building-up of rural people's organizations - by addressing community-felt issues and by meeting specific community needs. People's participation and

NGOs must advocate for more substantial reforms on the national policy level.

people's empowerment are key working principles: Asian NGOs, whatever their specific program of involvement, invariably believe that the key to participation lies in organization. Hence, community-based and sectoral-based organizing takes several forms, e.g., cooperatives, women's groups, irrigator's associations, farmer's organizations as well as agrarian reform and anti-logging advocacy campaigns.

Specific fields of specialization seem to be more pronounced in rural credit schemes and income-generating activities, agricultural production and marketing, rural nutrition and health, literacy and non-formal education, social forestry and reforestation, fisheries and women. The majority of NGO programs in Asia are rural-based with specific target groups, such as farmers, women, youth and (even) policymakers. A few have urban populations as their target clientele while some attempt to link up rural producers with urban consumers.

The range of motivations behind NGO activism is broad and includes religious orientation, youthful idealism, theoretical aims, a desire to repay society and the need to establish experience. Nevertheless, some basic NGO characteristics include a strong orientation to the community and the poor, emphasis on participatory processes and decentralized decision-making, direct linkage with target sectors, and organizational flexibility in programs and operations.

In several Asian countries, NGOs have been able to make significant and visible contributions to national development in varying degrees and magnitude by shaping public policy, providing experiments that have been adopted successfully as national programs, and directly implementing programs at a significant or national scale. (*please see Table 2*)

Such contributions have been recognized both at the

Table 2: Significant NGO Impact Areas in Selected Asian Countries

Country	Significant NGO Impact Area	Country	Significant NGO Impact Area	
Bangladesh	Health and family planning Institution of primary health care approach Passage of the generic drugs law Credit and livelihood generation Alternative systems for collective marketing Introduction of new agricultural systems Implementation of massive afforestation programs Setting up of nursery systems Agrarian Reform and resource rights	Pakistan	Income generation: savings and credit Environmental protection, training on natural resource management Community organizing: establishment of family planning centers, health care	
	India	Productivity and distribution of bhoodan and gramdan lands Credit and livelihood generation Facilitation of the poor's involvement in collective economic activities Human rights, peace work Cultural rights and social integration Formal and non-formal educational programs Women's rights and issues Constituency and movement-building	Philippines	Agrarian Reform (AR) National coalition-building among peasant organizations Passage of Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law Tripartite field implementation of AR Agriculture/Forestry/Fisheries Introduction of Farming Systems Banning of certain agri-chemicals National coalition-building among fisherfolk organizations Environment: public awareness and constituency-building
Indonesia		Environmental protection Recognition of NGO roles in the National Basic Law for the Protection of the Environment Human rights issues	Sri Lanka	Provision of credit to the poor, particularly women Setting up of cooperatives Pre-school education in grassroots communities Health: developing village-based preventive health care system Environment: public awareness and constituency-building, tree-planting activities
		Nepal	Environment: community forestry Community and rural development activities Non-formal education Health	Thailand
			Malaysia	Consumer awareness and protection Public awareness and constituency-building

national and international level by government and donors alike. At the international level, NGOs have advocated for institutional and policy reforms within the Multilateral Financial Institutions, by challenging the issues surrounding the latter's growth-oriented paradigm.

The Evolution of NGO Perspectives and Strategies

In recent years, the basic strategies utilized for addressing poverty have undergone certain substantial changes. As NGOs in Asia gained more knowledge of the nature of development and the potentials of their own role, they have pursued increasingly sophisticated and -- from a policy perspective -- more powerful strategies. This has involved a lengthening of their time perspectives, a broadening of their analysis of the problem, and a shift from operational towards more catalytic roles.

Traditionally, NGOs seeking to address poverty issues engaged in direct delivery of relief and welfare services. Simple infrastructural projects, roving medical clinic services, donations of food and implements -- these have, and still constitute essential and appropriate responses to emergency situations demanding an immediate humanitarian response. However, such actions have increasingly been seen to offer little more than temporary alleviation of the symptoms of underdevelopment.

In Indonesia, for example, intermediate NGOs are known as "self-help" promoters (SHPs). They are autonomous, self-directing intermediary organizations which service primary groups of village communities or people's organizations, which are known in turn as "self-help organizations". Under such a set-up, intermediate NGOs have served to create "alternative" delivery mechanisms for goods and services. In Bangladesh, inhuman suffering and massive destruction wrought by the War of Liberation in 1971 called for immediate relief and rehabilitation interventions. From distributing food, medicine, blankets and clothes, NGOs further engaged themselves in constructing houses, mobilizing transport facilities, and developing physical infrastructure for the victims of war. Well-known Bangladeshi NGOs such as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Gonoshasthya Kendra, and Caritas were formed from the spontaneous responses during this period of extreme crisis.

Next came a generation of NGOs who have increasingly recognized that direct delivery of food, clothing, shelter and health care attacked only symptoms and not the root causes of poverty. Hence, their actions revolved around self-help -- sustainable improvements in the lives of the poor by increasing the poor's capacities to meet their own needs. Such NGOs emphasize community development activities as a means to promote self-reliance. Most Asian rural development NGOs today belong to this category.

Still, at present, an increasing number of NGOs are again re-examining their basic strategies, with the realization that acting on their own, NGOs can effectively reach only a few selected localities. At the same time, self-reliant initiatives can be sustained only to the extent that the national development system, involving both private and government agencies, responds to local efforts. Since government commands the most resources required for broader impact, NGOs must advocate for more substantial reforms on the national policy level. These are what David Korten has called *Third Generation NGOs*.

Increasingly, many of these third generation NGOs have begun to take root, with a macro perspective of problems, and a policy agenda with government and other mainframe institutions. The substantial growth of NGO networks in many Asian countries and their increasing willingness to engage macro institutions in critical dialogue indicate continuing trend towards the broadening of NGO perspectives and roles.

The Policy Environment of NGOs

Most Asian governments have official policy pronouncements which recognize the role of NGOs and the voluntary sector. But in many instances, actual government practices contradict with official declarations and commitments on popular participation and people empowerment. Legal restrictions are imposed on the official registration of societal groups and NGOs. Stringent controls are placed on funding, particularly those sourced from foreign donors. Restrictions on travel, both within and outside the country, close

Table 3: Laws and Regulations in NGOs in Selected Asian Countries

Country	Salient Features of Existing Laws and Regulations on NGOs
Bangladesh	<p>1961: The Voluntary Social Agencies Ordinance specifying that all voluntary agencies must register and be approved by the Registration Authority; this body also has the power to: (i) approve the constitution of agencies and all amendments thereof; (ii) inspect all books of accounts and other records of the agency; (iii) suspend or dissolve the agency for failure to comply with ordinances.</p> <p>1978: Foreign Donations Regulation requires NGOs to report any foreign aid received and obtain prior approval of foreign-funded activity.</p> <p>1982: Ordinance No. XXXI prohibits any citizen or NGO from receiving any foreign aid without prior permission; also, donors must obtain prior government approval for any foreign contributions to any citizen or NGO.</p> <p>1983: Nira-III of the Security Branch of the Ministry of Home Affairs sets the procedure governing foreign donations.</p>
India	<p>Five-Year Plan recognizes the role of voluntary organizations.</p> <p>1984: Foreign Contributions Regulation Act requires NGOs which receive foreign aid to register with the Ministry of Home Affairs.</p>
Indonesia	<p>Law No. 2-1982 recognizes the roles of NGOs in addressing environmental and development problems.</p> <p>Law No. 8-1985 on Social Organization stipulates: (i) State ideology of Pancasila be the guiding principle of all social organizations; (ii) Obligatory registration of social organizations; (iii) Social organizations required to report and receive approval of foreign aid; (iv) An umbrella organization be set up to coordinate the activities of social organizations; (v) Social organizations operating at village level coordinate the activities with the LKMD; and (vi) Government able to suspend and dissolve social organizations.</p>
Malaysia	<p>Societies Act of 1966 specifies that all social organizations must register and be approved by the Registrar of Societies</p> <p>1983: Amendment to the Societies Act stipulates: (i) social organizations must report all foreign financial and organizational assistance to the Registrar; (ii) registrar is authorized to: forbid foreign contract; conduct searches of social organizations without a warrant; remove members from social organization's Board of Directors; dissolve social organizations.</p>
Nepal	<p>1992-97: Eighth Five-Year Plan recognizes the NGO role. To help increase NGO effectiveness, the Plan stipulates that the government will: (i) define specific areas and sectors where NGOs have a comparative advantage; (ii) simplify rules and regulations for NGO registration and organization; (iii) modify tax laws.</p> <p>1993: Amended Social Welfare Act changes the Social Services National Coordination Council (SSNCC) into the Social Welfare Council and stipulates that NGO membership in SWC is now discretionary.⁷</p>
Pakistan	<p>1961: Similar to the Voluntary Social Agencies Ordinance of Bangladesh.</p> <p>1962: The Voluntary Social Agencies Ordinance stipulates specific requirements and procedures covering agency registration, maintenance of accounts and registers, change of address, etc.</p>
Philippines	<p>1987: Memo No. 150 of the Economic Affairs Division creates a standing committee to review all proposals for funding of NGOs from foreign aid.</p> <p>1987: Section 23, Article II of the Philippine Constitution states that "the State shall encourage NGOs, community-based or sectoral organizations" while Article XIII on the "Roles and Rights of People's Organizations (POs)" stipulates that: (i) the State shall respect the role of independent POs; (ii) the right of the people and their organizations to effective and reasonable participation at all levels shall not be abridged; (iii) the State shall, by law, facilitate the establishment of adequate consultation mechanisms.</p> <p>1989: NEDA Board Resolution No. 2 provides guidelines for GO/NGO Collaboration, including: accreditation for program participation; availment of tax exemption, funding support and incentives to NGOs; and provision of mechanisms for GO/NGO collaboration.</p> <p>1991: Article III, Chapter IV of the Local Government Code spells out the following policies for NGOs and POs: (i) local government units shall promote the establishment and operations of POs and NGOs to become active partners in the pursuit of local autonomy; (ii) local government units may enter into joint ventures and other cooperative arrangements with POs and NGOs to engage in the delivery of certain basic services and enhance the economic and social well-being of the people.</p>
Sri Lanka	<p>Voluntary registration for groups seeking legal status through CAP 105, Trust Act with Public Trustee, Company Act No. 17/1982, Voluntary Social Service Organizations Act of 1981.</p>
Thailand	<p>While the law recognizes NGOs as non-profit organizations, these are classified further as foundations or associations. Applicant-organizations must stipulate that they will not be involved in politics. Foundations, even when registered, do not automatically receive tax exempt status.</p>

monitoring and, at times, prohibition of certain NGO activities - all serve to hamper the evolution of real people's participation. (please see Table 3)

In many Asian countries, NGO action is still effectively curtailed by an inhospitable policy environment. In countries where voluntary action is tolerated or even encouraged, NGOs often risk being co-opted by government and rendered ineffective.

NGOs dedicated to increasing productivity and income at the grassroots level are often frustrated by the lack of convergence, indeed by the outright incongruence, between micro and macro efforts. Any improvements in the conditions of living of the poor through community enterprises are often eroded by the effects of structural adjustment programs that governments carry out precisely in the name of development. In a very real sense, where micro-macro development linkages are concerned, the former serves as the poor's only safety net against the latter.

On the other hand, NGOs can not ignore the need for vertical integration of on-the-ground projects with policy reform. As a framework, policy reform directs programs and projects on a national scale and enhances the effectiveness, efficiency and replicability of successful programs and projects. Therefore, there is a need to encourage responsiveness and direct accountability of governments and multilateral financial institutions to disadvantaged groups.

People's Participation as a Distinctive NGO Contribution

It is in the aspect of people's participation where Asian NGOs have distinctly transformed their independent poverty alleviation measures beyond what government approaches have attained. NGOs tend to stress greater involvement by beneficiaries and target groups, thereby increasing the effectiveness of their programs.

Asian NGOs see their role as creating the environment and conditions whereby people can regenerate not only their capacity for self-

determination but their self-respect. As Bangladeshi NGOs believe, the key to breaking the hold of the poverty-trap lies not in the flow of financial resources in abundance but in restructuring the predominant power relations through the empowerment of the poor, development of their institutions and evolving an effective and just distribution of resources.

The main strength of NGOs seems to lie in their collective experience and practice of participatory approaches and the application of such approaches to a broad range of endeavours -- whether in health, consumer protection or agriculture. NGOs have given "participation" its various institutional forms -- from community and sectoral organizing and creation of self-help groups to public campaigns, constituency-building activities, networking, participatory research and monitoring, community statistics and planning.

Peoples' Organizations (POs) are the best and most direct expression of people's participation, of organizing the poor -- farmers, landless rural workers, forest dwellers, women and youth. As self-help groups, multi-purpose cooperative societies such as those in Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand have increased local capacities and potentials based on available resources and felt needs.

The varied participatory approaches have been refined and tempered through a constant process of "action and reflection" under varying situations. But more than an approach, participation is viewed by most NGOs as a value or principle in itself -- as a parameter for measuring the very impact or success of programs. It must be noted that governments and international organizations often tend to promote participation merely as a methodology or management tool, and thus this has led to many failed attempts at replicating successful programs.

□ People's Management and Control of Natural Resources

Land Tenure Security. For most people's organizations and NGOs, access and control of natural resources is still the most fundamental issue -- almost compatible to "a right to survival" itself. In

dismantle monopoly control over privately-owned land. Of 10 million Filipinos comprising the agricultural labor force, only 15% are owner-cultivators while 85% have no control over the lands they till. In Bangladesh, 60% of households are without land. NGO initiatives in accessing productive resources entail securing tenure to land, water, and fodder.

NGOs must initiate programs to obtain whatever benefits are available to the people under the existing policy framework. For instance, the organized landless groups in Bangladesh collectively took possession of Khas land illegally occupied by large landowners, took lease of dried out river beds and re-excavated them for conversion into a large stretch of water for fish cultivation. To push for agrarian reform, there are existing support centers of NGOs and POs on agrarian reform, community information through participatory data gathering and planning, field reports sent to policymakers, information dissemination, and the holding of dialogues and consultations among governments, NGOs, and POs.

TriPARRD, or the Tripartite Partnership for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in the Philippines, is a partnership between NGOs and POs that aim for actual land transfer and the delivery of support services. Antique in the Western Visayas was one of the initial provinces for TriPARRD implementation. From 1989 to 1992, over 400 hectares of the targeted 1,393 have been transferred to 224 farmers. Beyond the quantifiables, farmers gained the confidence to pursue their own agrarian reform and to work together with government and NGOs. Farmers now engage in monitoring and implementing the land transfer activities after undergoing training, developing their own people's organizations, and receiving over \$40,000 in support services.

In East Java, Indonesia, where the sheer number of landless and near-landless families makes land redistribution under an ineffective agrarian reform program well-nigh impossible, the NGO-sponsored Land Asset Endowment Program presents an acceptable compromise. Using government-owned land, this Program seeks to guarantee each of the four to five million landless families 25-year renewable rights to holdings of at least 200 m². Though it is not redistribution as the landless would like, the Program hopes to demonstrate that the holdings can be run viably and thus lay the groundwork for genuine land reform in East Java.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness and concern on environmental conservation and management among governments, media, the academe, and local communities. Hence, in many communities and villages in Asia, innovative ways and means to protect, conserve, repair and manage community-based natural resources are being undertaken. In the Philippines, lobbying for agrarian and fishing reforms continues, while some NGOs have begun experimenting with community-based natural resource management councils and people's agrarian reform councils. In Indonesia, Bina Desa has introduced community-level technologies to ensure water supply for drinking and cultivation. The key feature in all successful grassroots efforts has been community-based people's participation.

A Common Response to Poverty and Environmental Concerns. Responding to environmental concerns is a relatively new area for most NGOs which have not worked mainly or exclusively on environmental issues. But relating environment to poverty concerns is not only necessary but vital to the survival of both human and natural resources. Poverty and environmental degradation form a vicious cycle of depletion and destruction. Damage to environmental resources reduces poor people's livelihood sources and opportunities, increases health hazards, and threatens the very life-sustaining system of poor rural communities. On the other hand, poverty pressures people into destroying their immediate environment in order to survive.

Some of the approaches that have been utilized by NGOs to address the twin issues of poverty and environment are:

1. Disseminating information on environmental issues to various publics, e.g. communities, government, business, etc.;
2. Educating and training technical and field staff and community leaders on environmental protection, conservation, rehabilitation processes and technologies;
3. Initiating field projects on environmental protection, conservation, rehabilitation;

4. Establishing local and international linkages with other NGOs and resource organizations especially, environmental NGOs; and,
5. Setting up projects on community forestry with fruit tree planting and nursery components, homestead gardening, alternative agricultural practices such as organic farming and wasteland development, coastal development, fuel efficient lamps and cook stoves, alternative energy sources such as solar biogas, waste recycling, sanitation and health facilities and services, housing with sanitation and potable water components, and potable water sourcing and facilities.

Environmental as well as rural development NGOs have formed broad-based coalitions and networks to address environmental issues and policy questions. National consultations have been held in order to stimulate policy research and to consolidate the people's legislative agenda. In the Philippines, the former Congress for a People's Agrarian Reform (CPAR) and the National Coalition for Fisheries Aquatic Reform (NACFAR) are two coalitions which have engaged government on its policies on agrarian reform and fisheries respectively.

Caritas Bangladesh is implementing a Drought Recovery Program in the Barind Tracts of the Rajshahi District which is being threatened by desertification. The people have re-excavated ponds in the dry season for irrigation and fish culture. They planted trees on homesteads and the pond banks. While preventing further desertification, the people in the community also generated income and gained employment. The lands are leased from the owners who receive 25% of the gains from the people's fish-raising and tree-planting.

Water loss in the Pakistan watercourses was occurring at an alarming 30% to 40%. The Water Users Associations (WUA) were taught to build, repair, and maintain watercourses to stem the loss of valuable irrigation water. Farmers are first oriented and then organized into WUAs. The WUA takes charge of surveying, designing, and completing the project with incentives for full participation of members. After their success in water management, WUAs have also ventured into agribusiness and sustainable agriculture projects.

Responses to Desertification. For countries in South Asia, the major environmental threats are deforestation, desertification and damage to the

genetic and aquatic environment. NGOs have recognized the problem of desertification although deforestation is seen as the most important and pressing concern at present. The problem of desertification is treated as the effect of hydrological quandary or the degradation of dry lands in terms of productivity and rain-use efficiency.

NGOs are still in the midst of conducting research and formulating plans for intervention though some have already begun by means of small-scale community projects on irrigation, water management, and dryland agriculture. In addressing this problem, some have utilized afforestation and soil management, water conservation programs, and small-scale irrigation systems.

Small-scale irrigation systems such as open wells, persian wheels, village tanks, small pumps, tubewells for groundwater use, and other small facilities have been managed and maintained by community organizations, farmers groups, water users associations and by individual farmers. NGOs usually provide credit support and motivation to partner organizations for them to purchase irrigation pumps. In Bangladesh, these groups are encouraged to sell water to farmers in exchange for crops. The landless groups eventually pay back the loan and become owners of the equipment. Over 400 landless irrigation schemes have been sponsored by various NGOs in Bangladesh.

Community Forestry. Aside from environmental education, research, and training, South Asian NGOs are deeply engaged in afforestation and community forestry programs. Community forestry stresses social cohesion and networking among local peoples to protect themselves and their resources against outside encroachment. As a social movement, it also emphasizes local self-reliance and people empowerment by improving local capacity to handle community problems, strengthening their community spirit, increasing people's participation, and striking a balance between the utilization of forest resources and its conservation.

Bangladeshi NGOs have negotiated with government to allow their partner groups to plant trees along roadsides and other public places. NGOs involved in fisheries management assisted their

partner groups to identify and take out long-term leases on degraded government land, idle private land, and baors for fish farming.

In South Cotabato, Philippines, SCFI assists families to take advantage of the government's Integrated Social Forestry Program which grants forest occupants a renewable 25-year secure tenure in three to seven hectare tracts of land. In Bangladesh, an innovative project in community forestry is the care-taker system introduced by Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Caritas. Individuals are hired to be caretakers of certain areas with a given salary. The intended beneficiaries are made responsible for nurturing and protecting the trees planted. This system has given the community a sense of belonging with their environment. In Proshika-organized upazilas the farmers collectively decide on a forest protection plan during group meetings. Following the plan, they take up a certain area of the degraded forests, and each member is assigned plots to supervise and patrol.

In community-based interventions, NGOs have learned to respect the traditional structures and values in the communities they are entering. In Asia, traditional and religious beliefs are usually incorporated in forest resource management. Livelihood alternatives should capitalize on the products of indigenous resources while sustaining trees in the forest. Women perform vital tasks in conserving and protecting the forests while ensuring the needs of their households.

The people's cultural background, especially their religion, can greatly affect the success of forest protection activities at the village level. In the case of Ban Pa Lan, Chiang Rai in Thailand, the Pa Lan people hold the forest sacred and respect it as the dwelling place of spirits of their ancestors. The community of Pa Lan protects a 300 rai forest which is the source of water for their farmlands and partly supports their livelihood.

Towards a New Vision and Practice of Sustainable Agriculture

When the Green Revolution engulfed Asia, it displaced existing indigenous systems of agriculture. Knowledge became centralized and homogenized. And this centralized power has since become a form of domination over

farmers. This technological displacement led to cultural and spiritual displacement, with peasants and indigenous peoples alienated by the mechanization and chemicalization of agriculture. In Nicanor Perlas' "The Seven Dimensions of Sustainable Agriculture", sustainable agricultural systems must be ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just and equitable, culturally sensitive, based on integrative and holistic science, founded in the use of appropriate technologies, and supportive of the awakening of human potentials. Within the sustainable agriculture (SA) framework, NGOs and farmers' groups in Asia are adopting an alternative way of viewing technology.

Tribal communities are the cultural bearers of what has come to be increasingly known and respected in the academic and development communities as IKS or Indigenous Knowledge Systems (Brokensha, 1990). NGOs in Asia recognize that for agriculture to be sustainable and technology to be viable, they need to be more sensitive to the culture and knowledge of the people. Indigenous cultural communities and peasants do possess their own innovative capacities and farming systems that are highly attuned to ecological factors. SA practitioners in Asia have incorporated IKS in their farming methods and are trying to promote the various farmers' innovations in their own countries. In Thailand, NGO workers from the Appropriate Technology Association (ATA) popularized self-reliant and chemical-free crop production, an example of IKS which they discovered through field visits to farms throughout the country.

The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) is hard pressed to create a cropping system where five economic species are growing at the same time. The Hanunuos of Mindoro, Philippines, however, are acquainted with 430 crops and can grow as many as 40 species at the same time throughout the year (Conklin, 1957). Their multistoried cropping systems can achieve, at minimal costs, yields that are far ahead of intensive rice farming.

Piloting, field demonstration, and the conduct of exposure visits are some approaches that have proven to be effective in spreading IKS and farmers' innovations. The Mag-uugmad Foundation

in Cebu, Philippines suggests a one-technology approach, where technologies are introduced one at a time so as not to overload or confuse the villagers.

To spread information on SA technologies in Bangladesh, BARRA has organized national level trainings for trainers and mid-level agricultural managers. From an idea formulation meeting with other NGOs, BARRA helped develop FORAM (Forum for Regenerative Agriculture Movement) which now comprises more than 70 NGOs. All of the collaborating organizations conduct action research on SA technologies. Results are monitored and shared with all FORAM members and interested research organizations. Steps have been taken to develop a trial or demonstration farm (in collaboration with CARITAS/MAWTS) at Dhaka for future trainees and visitors.

“Teaching by showing” is also an effective means of promoting technologies. The Centre for Environment Technology Development Malaysia (CETDEM) started an organic farm which served as a model farm to promote sustainable agriculture. Following CETDEM’s lead, similar farms were put up in other parts of Malaysia. Thai NGOs promote sustainable agriculture by organizing farm visit tours and documenting and publishing case studies.

The creation of networks of farmers improve dissemination of information and training. In Sri Lanka, the Network of Organic Farmers disseminate information on organic farming, train farmers in organic farming techniques, and encourage farmers and consumers to support organic agriculture. The Alternative Agriculture Group (AAG), an NGO network in Thailand, has been a major forum for the sharing of experience and discussion among NGOs.

Some Asian NGOs have begun exploring the sixth dimension of SA — the use of appropriate technologies - through an approach known as Participatory Technology Development (PTD). The PTD approach engages the farmer, from the very beginning, in the evolution of new technologies. Participatory technology development means faster adaptation by farmers since the latter would have been involved in all the key decisions from the beginning, all parties speak the same language, and the examples emanate from the same cultural and ecological context.

In the course of their involvement, farmers become aware of the problems inherent in the adoption of certain technologies. With the participation of the farmers, NGOs redesign farming systems that are more appropriate to the socio-economic conditions of the villagers, including the best existing cropping patterns and practices in their area. Studies are also conducted to determine the comparative performance of preferred practices with proposed innovations. Farmer-conducted experiments have proved to be ideal because these enhance the research capability of the farmers and the final design incorporates the technological options preferred by the farmers.

Modern developments in ecological agriculture and peasant practices can be combined fruitfully for greater yields and sustainability. Overall, participatory technology development results in the empowerment of peasants and farmers.

In the Philippines, MASIPAG, a partnership of farmers, scientists and NGO representatives, was formed in 1983 to develop alternative methods in rice production. The farmers’ research and problem-solving skills are harnessed to seek solutions to farm problems. In consultation with the farmers, the scientists then adapt laboratory experiments to actual farm conditions, following which the farmers test the technology on their farms. In this way, the two groups are able to reconcile contemporary and indigenous farming practices. MASIPAG has added more than 50 traditional rice seed varieties to its collection; developed and distributed seeds that produce crops which are resistant to pests, droughts and typhoons; and improved farm incomes.

In Nepal, the Community Welfare and Development Society (CWDS) organized a National Workshop on Regenerative Agriculture with policy makers, administrators, scientists, and NGOs. The workshop resulted in a Regenerative Agriculture program which includes plans for developing a Center on Regenerative Agriculture. By developing partnerships with government agencies, research organizations and other NGOs, CWDS is building its capacity to develop IKS-based agriculture with the rural poor of Nepal.

A number of farmers’ organizations and cooperatives have also set up Farmer Field Schools on Integrated Pest Management (IPM). Instead of the traditional short-term methods that had farmers listening to lectures, these IPM schools have trainers

working alongside farmers in the fields. The trainers, some of whom are farmer-leaders themselves, spend the entire cropping season with the farmers. Through direct experience in the fields, farmers learn the technologies quickly and are able to improvise and share their own knowledge as they go along. In the Philippines, about 22,000 farmers have been trained in more than 2,000 farmer field schools since the program's launching in 1993.

Community Enterprise: Economics in the Service of the People

NGOs provide concrete opportunities for the disadvantaged and powerless to gain access to resources — information, capital, training, technology — not otherwise made available by policies and structures. Many NGOs provide programs in credit and marketing as an alternative to usurers and traders. Skills and technology in micro-entrepreneurship or small-scale enterprise development are also developed. Social welfare services include programs in health, nutrition, daycare preschool education, and adult education among others. Initiatives in accessing markets and services have resulted in strategies such as promoting alternative methods and multiplying use of local initiatives and resources, blending modern with indigenous technologies, promoting rural savings and other surplus and mobilizing these funds, and activating rural service centers.

Capacity-building, community goal-setting, value-formation, and building on the traditional and religious beliefs of the communities are all integral parts of building viable people's organizations in Asia. Organizing must be facilitated by the NGOs in such a way that the people themselves, based on their perceived needs, are able to identify their objectives and the programs necessary to fulfill them.

The struggle of Asian peoples to protect their livelihoods serves not only as an act of protest, but as a reassertion of their rights and human dignity. Sustainable livelihood refers to the means by which a community meets its basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, security, recreation and spiritual upliftment, as well as management of its resources. Its operational principles are shared prosperity,

stewardship of resources, interdependent relationships among sectors and a bias towards poverty alleviation.

A major form of increasing people's access has been self-help groups, particularly the various types of cooperatives (credit and savings, consumer and marketing) which have gained widespread reach throughout the region. Bina Swadaya has helped organize over 18,000 Usaha Bersamas (pre-cooperatives) all over Indonesia in collaboration with government and other NGOs. And where most government-sponsored cooperatives have failed, VICTO in Central Philippines now has some 60,000 members. Other coops have been able to accumulate sufficient savings to gain strong bargaining positions vis-a-vis the private commercial banks, or even to set-up their own banking institutions.

According to Gandhi, community economics is organized on the basis of non-violent occupations involving no exploitation or envy of others. It is organized not on the basis of rights but on the duties of citizens. Those who engage in occupations do not merely earn their living, they contribute to the good of the community through their labors.

After decades of working among communities, NGOs have come forward with a more confident agenda. They seek to revitalize people's bonds with their community and environment through positive, community-based actions. Increasingly, local communities and urban neighborhoods across Asia have begun to confront the rising tide of global market integration through the self-assertion of their rights over their space and livelihoods. More than mere strategy, theirs is an act of fighting back for survival. This growing people's movement is taking shape in the form of savings societies and people's banks, community enterprises, women's forums and many other forms of self-help and voluntary action.

In most parts of Asia, NGOs have simply taken over where government has failed, such as in the delivery of basic services. This has been the case in the Philippines, where NGOs all over the country respond to the problems of countryside development through community organizing, education and training, primary health care promotion, agricultural extension and cultural activities that revive community life.

One emerging trend in Philippine NGO activities is integrated area development. This area-based approach not only seeks to hasten the development of village clusters, it also addresses equity concerns within communities. Thus, efforts towards agrarian reform are combined with agricultural production, producers and consumers are linked through cooperatives, and people interact with local governments in formulating area development plans.

The Agha Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) is a model project of rural development in Pakistan. Its main strategy in smallholder development involves organization and collective management, generation of capital through savings, and upgrading of human skills. In increasing the capacity of local people to make use of opportunities to improve their welfare, AKRSP invokes self-help wherein people organize themselves, acquire new skills, accumulate their own capital and improve their capacity to manage their own development. Effective Village Organizations (VOs) have been established through bottom-up planning (villagers choose program directions), long program duration (to build institutions among peoples), and direct implementation by the NGO workers (to allow for flexibility and adaptation). The attitudes of the village people have changed significantly. The people were able to reduce fruit losses after taking courses in plant protection, improve crop varieties through demonstration plots, and manage livestock after training. In the first six years of the program, 526 VOs have been established and 226 productive infrastructure (mostly irrigation channels or link roads) have been completed.

Villages in Nepal, on the other hand, have had a long tradition of mobilizing self-help groups as part of their survival response. Earlier groups carried out activities such as agricultural labor exchange, construction and repair of irrigation canals and roads, organization of rituals and festivals and others. These groups later developed into NGOs with more systematic approaches in community-based planning, mutual help, and advocacy on national and international issues.

In many instances, it is the villages themselves that define their own path to development. One example can be seen in the complete transformation of Ralejan Siddhi, a village in the Maharashtra State of India. In 1976, the agrarian economy of the village was shattered due to massive soil erosion, deforestation, recurrent droughts and overall

environmental degradation. Ralejan suffered from acute scarcity of water and chronic shortages in food supply. As a result, there was total decay in the economic, social and moral life in the village.

But the persistent efforts of the villagers of Ralejan Siddhi over a span of 20 years paid off, bringing complete transformation to the community. Not only did the village achieve self-sufficiency in foodgrains, milk and fodder; it now sells its surplus to nearby villages. Such a dramatic turnaround was made possible by a simple program adopted by the villagers. There were no grand economic designs to speak of, only a simple, day-to-day, problem-solving process. Because they could easily relate to the objectives and see the immediate benefits, the villagers' talents and energies were put to maximum use. This contrasted with the government's incomprehensible macro-economic policies.

Elsewhere, NGOs have learned that by building on local capital, villages and towns could be revived. In the southern town of Tagum, Davao del Norte, in the Philippines, an alternative financing cooperative that rivals commercial banks operates in full gear. Born from humble efforts, the Tagum Cooperative Bank provides its members with a variety of services, foremost of which are credit loans. Members are given higher interest rates for their savings than those given by commercial banks. The bank also ventures into community development projects by extending agricultural assistance to its farmer-members.

Similarly, the Cooperative Development Foundation, an NGO working among rural women in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India, has created a self-sustaining cooperative enterprise whose operations are wholly-financed by members' contributions. By offering lower interest rates on loans, the cooperative has

NGOs have learned to respect the traditional structures and values in the communities they are entering.

broken the rural women's dependence on usurious moneylenders and, in the process, generated huge savings that are reinvested in the communities.

Active people's participation is vital to the success of any community-based enterprise. The foregoing examples show that if people are involved from planning to implementation, they gain that sense of true ownership that encourages greater participation.

The challenge for NGOs is how to expand existing successes in community initiatives by covering larger areas, sharing technologies and approaches, linking up efforts and pushing for reforms in structures and policies of governments and financial institutions.

Re-Defining the Accountability of Governments and International Institutions to Asian Communities

At the national level, NGOs have initiated networking of efforts and federation-building among POs to achieve scale and impact. They engage in direct advocacy work -- building mechanisms for dialogue with government and where feasible and advantageous to target communities, direct partnership with government. The emergence of national associations and networks which actively pursue advocacy work to parallel grassroots actions has led to the exploration of dialogue and linkages with government on specific projects and issues.

NGOs seek to maintain their autonomy from government control; thus, their initiatives tend to maintain a low profile especially in a policy environment that is antagonistic to or restrictive of NGO actions. Still, many NGOs seek to influence the environment within which they operate. While they are likely to resist government coordination, they can temper this through selective collaboration with government.

Asian NGOs have taken joint actions to create greater political space for their development activities. They have established nation-based federations and regional networks of NGOs to aggregate their interests and build links with

But more than an approach, participation is viewed by most NGOs as a value or principle in itself.

institutions both in and outside of government. In some instances, these have served as effective pressure groups which have prompted government to take note and to reconsider its official development plans and policies.

To some extent, NGOs have also employed the strategy of building alliances with key officials supportive of their initiatives. Mainly, NGOs are increasingly staking their claim over the policy process by engaging in direct and indirect policy advocacy. By critically commenting on development problems in national and international conferences and in the press and by advocating policy reforms, NGOs have intensified their political visibility vis-a-vis the government and brought the issue of NGO political space to the forefront. They are involved in policy advocacy in order to create democratic space and strengthen democratic institutions.

Various groups are advocating causes in favor of the disadvantaged sections of society and for structural change. They support peaceful struggles of people for empowerment and against injustice, exploitation, and oppression. In India, whose history has been dominated by socio-religious movements, there have been protests staged by adversely affected people such as peasants, indigenous peoples, and fisherfolk against encroachments and exploitation by the colonial rulers. National campaigns in India have included issues such as labor rights, civil rights, and campaigns against big dams such as the Narmada and Tehri. Through rallies, marches, demonstrations, *Dharanas* (sit-ins), fasts, dialogues, and Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in courts, Indian NGOs have raised awareness, initiated debates, and engaged government in order to facilitate change and reform. Many NGOs in Asia have undertaken advocacy for changes in policies, legislation,

institutions and implementation of development programs.

Notwithstanding the obvious difficulties and pitfalls in working with governments, NGOs sometimes find the government to be a useful ally. For instance, the tripartite partnership of people's organizations, NGOs, and government agencies working towards agrarian reform in the Philippines seems to be a promising model for grassroots reform. NGOs in Bangladesh also collaborate with the government to implement a national land reform program. They have set up a Coordination Council for Land Reform to work in cooperation with the Land Ministry on such activities as identifying the genuine landless, preparing the basic policy document, and training beneficiaries, among others. Unlike the tripartite experiments in the Philippines, however, the Land Reform Program in Bangladesh has lost momentum due to lack of political will.

NGOs have resisted bad development projects and campaigns for reforms, but, on the other hand, they have entered into engagements with international institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Some have formed regional networks to facilitate dialogue on specific issues and projects in countries, as well as to enhance the policy environment for the whole region.

Formed in 1958 with a *shramadana* (sharing of labor) work camp in a backward village, the Lanka Jatika Sarvodaya Shramadana Sagamaya (LJSSS) has blossomed into the largest NGO in Sri Lanka. Their first decade was devoted entirely to work camps across the country that mobilized villagers in road-building, digging of irrigation canals and housing construction, all with minimal foreign funding. The second decade focused on village development using a total approach that included family gatherings, group formation, development education, training schemes, community kitchens, health care centers and pre-schools. Today, the LJSSS has reached some 5,000 villages, about a quarter of all the villages in Sri Lanka. Among the major achievements of the LJSSS are: (i) evolution of an alternative development vision based on indigenous culture and traditions, social harmony and sharing; (ii) translation of the *shramadana* concept into a set of practices for rural economic and social infrastructure development; and (iii) taking pre-school education to the most remote villages of the country.

It has become paramount among NGOs to introduce institutional and policy reforms within the MFIs given the amount of influence these wield. Some NGOs directly challenge the issues surrounding the MFI's growth-oriented paradigm.

For example in 1988, the Asian NGO Coalition (ANGOC) and the Environmental Policy Institute (now Friends of the Earth-US) entered into a partnership to address MDB-related issues but with focus on the Asian Development Bank. As the campaign gained momentum, the effort included not only arresting badly-designed, destructive projects but also engaging the Bank in constructive dialogue on policy reforms and development models that incorporate greater transparency and public accountability.

An alternative course of action is the implementation of large-scale service programs to reach wider areas and beneficiaries. NGOs have helped develop self-reliant communities that replicate and expand practices that increase the quality of life of the poor. Also, people from the voluntary sector have started to enter institutions to effect changes from within. A number of NGO leaders are occupying high positions in government to bring in the agenda of the poor and disadvantaged. For example, NGO leaders in the Philippines are occupying key positions in the Health and Agrarian Reform portfolios.

CONCLUSION:

Lessons from Asian NGO Initiatives in People-Centered Development

Land tenure security. Land tenure security is a necessary precondition for successful community-based resource management. Only when people identify themselves with a given area will they feel obligated to protect their immediate environment and conserve its resources. Access to and control of upland resources require the recognition of ancestral/tribal land rights of indigenous communities and adequate environmental protection from the influx of migrants.

Decentralization and devolution of power/control. Governments, whether national or local,

That We May Live

should transfer effective control over local resources to the community. Current practices show that this can take any of several forms, i.e., recognition of ancestral and/or tribal rights, delineation of community forests, granting long-term forest stewardship contracts to communities instead of exclusive concessions to private contractors.

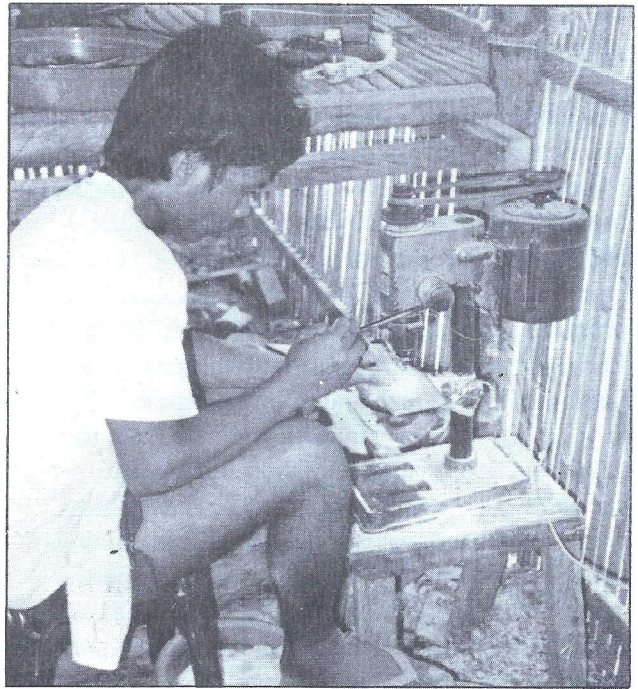
Such arrangements have perceived advantages: (i) permanent presence of communities, (ii) intricate community knowledge of and familiarity with the area, (iii) motivation to protect the resource as a source of livelihood especially against external incursions, (iv) internal community controls against possible abuse of individual authority, and (v) greater stability of organized communities rather than governments, whose policies often adapt to changes in structures or pressures from vested interests.

Principle of stewardship. Community-based resource management should be based on the principle of stewardship, i.e., the community acts as caretaker of a common resource. However, the community is granted certain concessions to the resource in the way that guarantees its sustainable use and against over-exploitation.

In community resource management, the people themselves take over functions accorded to the state by national constituencies and international agreements. It builds on the principle of sovereignty of people, the foundation principle on which all governments exist.

Meeting people's basic needs. Any development intervention should start from the people's felt needs.

The struggle of Asian peoples to protect their livelihoods serves not only as an act of protest, but as a reassertion of their rights and human dignity.



No external coercion or argument is as compelling as the people's own daily struggles to meet their needs for subsistence. Long-term sustainability of resources will be difficult while people are more concerned with meeting short-term needs.

Communities that live in the most ecologically-fragile areas - uplands and marginal lands - often do so more out of necessity or circumstance than by choice. Hence, corollary programs are necessary to guarantee greater people's access to and control over the more productive areas, i.e., land reform in the lowlands.

Drawing from a people's cultural and spiritual life. The motivation for, and practice of, community-based environmental action must draw from the richness of Asian cultures and religions -- the deep reverence for nature among indigenous communities, the Gandian spirit of nonviolence, traditional Japanese values of harmony, kinship and respect for elders, traditional community practices of consensus-building and working together (*gotong royong*, *bayanihan*) found in most Asian cultures, and belief in God and a Supreme Creator.

Gender Equity. Women must be given equal voice and representation in the management and control of local resources. In most Asian rural societies, women spend longer productive hours than men -



tending to the household as well as to the family livelihood. Thus, they have an equal, if not greater, stake on how community resources are managed and allocated.

Women, by virtue of their distinct roles and functions in rural societies, will have a qualitatively different perspective on how community resource must be managed. As daily caretakers of the household, they gather firewood, draw the water, and take care of the children, among other duties. Hence, they have greater direct insight into, and concern for, the sources of potable water, the state of the forests, and the general nutrition and health of their family. Women's daily chores bring them in close contact with the state of their immediate environment.

People's participation. People's participation means that people are involved in all stages of the decision-making process. Some of the basic elements of improved people's participation are: broadly distributed control of natural resources, networks of pluralistic people's organizations, high-level of political awareness and well-developed political consciousness, unrestricted access to information and opportunities, and self-reliance.

Importance of community organizing (CO). Community organizing is a powerful tool for people's

empowerment. It involves, among others, building increased awareness, skills formation and asset generation. CO recognizes that the strength of the poor lies in their number and collective moral force. It can be used to ensure the political will necessary for people-centered development.

It must be recognized that local communities are not entirely homogeneous; there are groups who may have varied, even conflicting interests. It is important to ensure effective representation of the poorer sectors and marginal groups.

Role of advocacy. Advocacy must be based on people's concrete concerns and actions. There must be a strong link between grassroots actions and advocacy for policy reform.

Appropriate technology. Appropriate technology is necessary for resource development. In cases where natural resources have been depleted to a critical state, outside technical and financial assistance is necessary to reconstruct it to a level of sustainable use.

Two views on the population issue. The often-raised issue of population pressure should be viewed in balance from both the biological and social points of view. The biological perspective argues the need for population control in order to stem the growing pressures made on finite resources. On the other hand, the social perspective argues that scarcity is due more to the inequitable distribution of resources, and there is a need to democratize access to, and control over, these natural resources.

Re-evaluating macroeconomic development priorities. Macroeconomic development priorities must be reoriented and made consistent to the basic principles of people-centered development. Among others, this include: (i) basic reorientation from being export-led towards meeting basic domestic needs, (ii) effective decentralization of structures and devolution of power and resources, and (iii) an overriding concern for the conservation and protection of the natural resource base. ■