

ENSURING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD FOR THE RURAL PROPLE AND REMOVAL OF RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT

Rural people in India are in deep miseris and their plight is really pathetic. They are deprived of proper educational, financial, technical, institutional and infrastructural support etc. They are to be made aware and fit to achieve sustainable livelihood after ascertaining their tangible and intangible assets, capabilities, qualities, aptitude etc. They need to be empowered and encouraged through proper education, provision of infrastructural facilities, durable roads and smooth communication networks, adequate health care and medical facilities etc. Moreover, necessary support and training for the farmers to adopt sustainable agricultural practices are to be arranged Institutional guidance, latest technology, liberal credit facilities etc. Digital Divide which refers to an unfortunate incident of non-availability of ICT facilities in remote areas, is to be removed through proactive measures. Thus, achievement of sustainable livelihood for these people needs all-round efforts by the all concerned through a Flagship Programme to be initiated by the government.

KEY WORDS

Educational infrastructure, Internal Revenue Generation, Information and Communication Technology, MGNREG scheme, Sustainable livelihood, Corporate Social Responsibilities, Institute of National importance, Sustainable agricultural practices, Common property resources, Civil Society

INTRODUCTION

The term 'sustainable development' was first used by 'World Conservation Strategy' presented by International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in 1980. Sustainability concerns the design and implementation of development strategies whose objectives are to ensure the maximum long-term improvement in quality of life of the population consistent with the resources available to the country. This involves an equitable distribution of the social and economic benefits of development and participation of beneficiaries. It also envisages identification of development priorities in the implementation and management of policies and programmes affecting their lives. In order to ensure long-term sustainability, it is essential to ensure that

the national, social and economic policy framework is consistent and supportive of the development objectives and methods of implementation of the projects and programmes in social sector. It aims at: (i) achieving sustainable development for improvements in the quality of life of the people (ii) providing better health and education opportunities for the people and (iii) ensuring a clean environment and promoting inter-generational equity.

The goal of sustainable development is to provide resources for the use of present populations without compromising availability of those resources for future generations, and without causing environmental damage. The process of sustainable development for the poor must listen to them properly as they are the most important stakeholders. A sustainable livelihood approach empowers the poor by seeing them not as victims; but as decision-makers. The rural poverty situation in India is highly complex in nature due to diverse geographical, demographical, ethnic, and social conditions. Livelihood opportunities have remained stagnant for these people as vast majority of the poor are engaged in low-skilled jobs in agriculture under the unorganised sector which does not provide them a strong base of income all the year round. In addition, their limited skill-base restricts their occupational mobility to benefit from the growth process at far flung cities. It is important to ensure that the skills of those, who remain in agricultural practices only as livelihood, are to be developed so as to augment their competency and employability. This will promote occupational mobility of the rural poor to enable them to switch off towards more gainful non-farm enterprises or employment. The rural youths also need effective technical and skill training to increase their employability. In the first instance, it is important to judge the aspirations, needs, present condition, aptitudes and awareness of the target group

In earlier years, the economic policies in India paid less attention to the right to livelihood of many poor and ordinary people. In usual development plan, they remained mostly neglected. With government support, sustainable livelihoods can be achieved for a number of marginalised and helpless people in India, while mobilising active participation of the people and other stakeholders, and tapping available resources. The approach towards sustainable livelihood aims at focusing on availability of skilled and trained professionals having suitable domain knowledge and strong democratic value-oriented mind-set with an in-depth knowledge of theory and practice of sustainable livelihood as well as governance of natural resources. It is having a specific orientation towards betterment of the society, and equitable, fair and exact development for the poor and women by enhancing their well-being through education, research-based knowledge, skills development, innovations, infrastructural development, adequate health care, eco-friendly entrepreneurship etc. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from the set-backs, and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future. Livelihoods are found unsustainable in the many villages as the people cannot (i) cope with the natural disasters like floods etc. and (ii) recover from the loss of capability and assets out of these set-backs. Poverty and lack of awareness deny the poor households an easy access to a wide range of incentives, employment opportunities, subsidies, services and credit facilities available in distant urban centres. Their helpless condition accelerates their exploitation and thus, they remain socially deprived^{1, 2, 3, 4 and 5}.

GROUND REALITIES

At present, rural people in India are trudging and their plight is really pathetic. These people are deprived of proper financial, technical, institutional and infrastructural support etc. At the same time, they are to be made aware and fit to achieve sustainable livelihood after ascertaining their tangible and intangible assets, capabilities, qualities, aptitude etc. They need to be empowered and encouraged through proper education, provision of rural infrastructural facilities, durable roads and smooth communication networks, support and training to the farmers to adopt sustainable agricultural practices, adequate health care and medical facilities etc. Thus, achievement of sustainable livelihood for these people needs all-round efforts by the all concerned through a Flagship Programme. The existing situation in these essential sectors is brought out hereunder for a clear appreciation of the exact state of affairs prevailing in the rural areas.

Educational sector

A severe lack of proper educational infrastructure in the remote rural areas is one of the important factors behind their backwardness. This pathetic and poignant picture continued up to the end of the last century. The students of these areas faced a number of adversities; but they continued their studies. This lagging behind by the rural students are clearly attributable to the lack of some basic facilities in the schools of these rural areas. It was very much difficult for these rural students to acquire expertise, dexterity, effective skill, awareness while living in remote areas. They could not manage to get necessary training facilities available in urban centres and, therefore, failed to achieve success to the extent that was being enjoyed by the urban students in the same competition. In fact, in most of the spheres of their lives, they rural student could succeed in competitions after three or more attempts; whereas, the urban students could achieve success in their first or the second attempt. In this context, the cases of super brilliant and resourceful students of the areas are not being considered.

In practice, the rural schools suffered from lack of good and expert teachers as they would prefer to have all types of facilities around their schools. At that stage, the intended and preferred facilities included: scope of fair education for their children, safe and secure environment, means of entertainment, medical care, good and affordable communication facilities and roads etc. Unfortunately, all these were not equally and fully available in the remote areas. As a result, most of the teachers did not like to go to remote areas with teaching as a profession. However, there were some devoted and great souls who did never care for all these difficulties, and continued to stay and teach in schools of remote areas. The problem got manifold as proper residential accommodations were not available for the teachers near the schools. Availability of rented houses was also a problem. Most of the teachers were from the nearby localities and they did not want to leave their ancestral home, because they had to look after their parents and maintain their landed properties. Arrival of more teachers from outside could have changed the prevailing environment to some extent and infuse fresh air as well as awareness in the educational eco-system.

In rainy season, the rural roads used to get unusable and inaccessible, and, therefore, absence of proper roads compelled the students to remain absent from classes. During floods, those schools used to become the shelters of marooned people and the academic classes remained suspended. In some areas, the school buildings were lacking in proper ventilation, seating arrangement, teachers' room, boundary wall and safety and security measures. The students were accommodated in small

and cramped rooms with suffocated atmosphere and noise from outside. Due to total lack of electricity in those days, the students had to attend classes in summer heat and conduct practical classes with a lot of difficulties. Frequent scarcity of kerosene oil in these areas created a serious problem for them. In most of the schools, there were no proper arrangements for toilet, latrines etc for the boys and girls. Even for the teachers, adequate arrangements were miserably lacking. The practice of arranging quiz competition, other extracurricular events etc. were rare in these schools at that time. The students had no other way to keep them updated about the latest developments in various subjects as newspapers were not easily available. Due to weak financial conditions of the parents, organisation of educational tours outside was then simply a distant dream for those students. Anyway, very few schools could provide slight more facilities; but the number of such schools was negligible.

The schools had no proper library facilities, and the books maintained by these schools were of old stock and inadequate to cater to the needs of the students in the back-drop of the changing scenario. The schools were fully dependent on grants-in-aid from the government and did lack any further financial back-up. The mechanism for Internal Revenue Generation at these schools was too weak as well as ill-organised, and the schools could not, at that point of time, meet any additional financial commitment. The laboratories of these schools were ill-equipped to meet the needs of the students of the science stream. The practical classes in these schools used to be a mockery and most of the students did not get proper chance to know the functioning of various scientific instruments. They simply received theoretical education without any proper exposure of the practical usage and handling of laboratory equipments. Efforts were there to make arrangements for allowing the students to attend practical classes in other developed schools in district headquarters or like for a short spell; but this was not enough. Thus, these students have deficiencies in resources and exposure to undertake their future journey towards higher science and engineering education. Moreover the text books were not in English and the students had to face tremendous difficulties while negotiating with the text books of higher classes written in English.

In the back-drop of the above position, the rural students had to struggle to rise in life. In many a cases, they could not take up higher studies and therefore, remained in villages as unemployed or semi-employed souls. Some of them became agricultural workers in their own land-holdings or continued as agricultural labours in others properties. The lucky ones with sound financial status could manage to start their own business or grab some employment in petty business in those areas or employment in private sector outside. Luckier souls managed to secure employment in government sectors or in schools. Gradually, the ill-fated students (about 95% of the total number of students) got bogged down in the suffocated rural eco-system and their talents as well as human resources were wasted. These souls became victims of infrastructural divide, information divide, knowledge divide, facility divide etc. In fine, the inadequate educational infrastructure demolished their growth and most of the people could not manage to achieve sustainable livelihood. Consequently, a social divide did come up which fostered a sense of deprivation in the minds of these rural youths who used to feel helpless, out of place and frustration in association with their urban counterparts.

COMMUNICATION AND INFRASTRUCTURAL FRONT

The road communication network was really pathetic in the rural areas. As a result, the villagers face huge problems to move from remote villages to the nearby small towns/semi-towns for their day-to-day activities. The situation used to become pathetic for them during the rainy season. *En route*, they need to cross small streams, canals etc either by boats or over bamboo-built bridges. These bridges, in many a case, are very much dangerous because they become vulnerable with the bamboo structures getting dilapidated in course of time. One fine morning, they give in and the users of these bridges take the help of boats to cross the water body. In most of the cases, manual boats are the only way out for these people. As a result, these boats become overloaded and operate with the passengers in a very risky manner. Sometimes, the boats sink resulting in death of people and/or loss of valuable documents. During floods, the situation becomes more complicated as concrete bridges are not always available in remote rural areas and these are still matters of dream even today.

The Government is trying its level best to put concrete bridges in all these points; but the process is very slow due to inherent problems and bottle-necks within the system itself. Local *Panchayats*, along with the enterprising villagers (including social workers) are also assisting the government to expedite the process. The government with its limited resources earmarked for this specific programme, is seriously constrained to achieve the target. Sometimes, disputes arise about the location of the proposed bridge and this is the greatest hindrance which gets ramified due to political bitterness. As a result, the villagers remain in the same state of helplessness as they were in the past. Lack of proper communication network across the villages and also between remote villages and rural towns/business centres / location of government offices, schools & colleges, railway stations/ bus terminals continued for a long period. This caused serious damages to the process of their economic growth and social, educational, cultural boost-up etc.

Consequently, development of many rural areas became stunted and the rural talents got little scope to avail the opportunity of various facilities (provided by the government and other agencies) in the urban circles. Generally, better facilities and opportunities are centred in places either in Block Development Offices/SDO Offices/District HQs or other important seats of business and commercial activities; but these locations are very much difficult to be accessed from remote areas due to lack of proper all weather roads and cheap mode of transportation facilities. For the same reason, poor students cannot travel to college or university in nearby towns and remain deprived of the scope of higher education. Local agriculture-based economy could not flourish due to lack of affordable and easy transport facilities. So, the farmers are deprived of a proper market to sell their agricultural produces. Other professionals also face difficulties to get suitable market for promoting and selling their handmade artefacts or products of the cottage and small scale industries.

AGRICULTURAL AND ADVERSE INCIDENTS

Drought is one of the reasons which demolish the agricultural process and put rural economy in doldrums. It is a natural disaster due to below-average rainfall in a region and this result in prolonged shortages in the water supply. It can have a substantial impact on the ecosystem and agriculture of the affected region, and harm the local economy. Prolonged droughts cause mass migrations and humanitarian crisis. Drought-prone areas are greatly low in humidity with dried-up watering-bodies

and rivers. Because of the lack of watering holes etc., many grazing animals are forced to migrate in search of more fertile lands. A severe drought or drought-like situation pushes the farmers towards many fatal consequences because their crops are lost and this is quite prevalent in India⁶.

Floods are the incidents that damage the agricultural practices of an area. It may occur as an overflow of water from water-bodies i.e. a river, lake, etc. It may also occur due to (i) an accumulation of rainwater on saturated ground in a flood-prone area and/or (ii) when the flow rate exceeds the capacity of the river channel. Floods (in particular more frequent or smaller floods) can also bring many benefits, such as recharging ground water, making soil more fertile and enriched in nutrients. Flood waters provide much needed water resources in arid and semi-arid regions where rainfalls can be very unevenly distributed throughout the year. Freshwater floods play an important role in maintaining ecosystems and are a key factor in maintaining floodplain biodiversity. Floods bring nutrients to lakes and rivers, which can lead to increased biomass and improved fisheries⁷.

The primary effects of flooding include loss of life, crops and damage to houses/buildings and other structures, including bridges, sewerage systems, roadways, etc. Floods cause severe problems to the farmers of the area who suffer a lot due to crop damages. Many people become homeless and out of any livelihood. They become helpless and sell out their landed properties etc. to manage their livelihood. Floods result in scarcity of drinking water or severe water contamination. Lack of clean water raises the risk of waterborne diseases. Damage to roads and transport infrastructures due to flood make them unfit for any emergency operation. The impact of floods may cause psychological damage to those affected, in particular where deaths, serious injuries and loss of property occur. Critical community-safety facilities, viz. hospitals, emergency-operations centres, police, fire, and rescue services in flood-prone areas are in severe risk of damage.

The people living in rural areas are generally dependent on agriculture; but the farmers (including the share-croppers) lose their crops, assets etc. if the areas are flood-prone. Therefore, it is most important to minimise the virulence of floods in these areas by adopting innovative methods. Agricultural practices in the rural areas need to be revamped by motivating the farmers to adopt the practice of sustainable agriculture through latest scientific approach. The farmers need to be empowered financially, technically and collectively in a consistent manner so that they can avail the facilities provided by the government. Crop-variation, soil-testing, use of suitable seeds, institutional guidance is the main accelerators. Agricultural Extension Officers of the Block Development Offices under the State Government are to motivate the farmers for adopting improvised methods while educating them, supplying necessary expertise, providing suitable expertise etc. They also need to adopt *boro* cultivation on a large scale in winter. Development of kitchen garden in the households of the rural area is to be taken up with fresh initiatives. Irrigation for *boro* cultivation and kitchen gardens is to be managed from out of the water stored in the water-bodies like ponds etc. At the same time, rearing of livestock is a welcome move and this is really helpful for the villagers. The step to develop kitchen garden, comprehensive *boro* cultivation and practice of sustainable agriculture as well as sensible farming would ensure sustainable livelihood. Though loan-waiver for farmers is the latest buzz-word, the economists prefer and suggest that an income-support scheme for small and marginal farmers might turn out to be a viable solution. Necessary provisions have been made by the Government of India in the budget proposals of 2019-2020.

HEALTH AND MEDICAL SERVICES

The need and importance of an efficient and effective public health system is immense. Public health system across India is a combination of all organised activities that prevent disease, prolong life and promote health and efficiency of its people. Public health initiatives that affect people in all the States are instilled by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. There are multiple systems of set-up in rural and urban areas of India. The healthcare system is organised into primary, secondary and tertiary levels. At the primary level, there are Sub Centres and Primary Health Centres (PHCs). At the secondary level, there are Community Health Centres (CHCs) and smaller Sub-District hospitals. Finally, the top level of public care provided by the government is at the tertiary level, which consists of Medical Colleges and District/General Hospitals. Primary Health Centres exist almost at all the block-levels in the rural areas and they serve as larger health clinics staffed with doctors and paramedics. PHCs also function to improve health education with a larger emphasis on preventative measures. District Hospitals often lack modern equipments and effective relations with local blood banks etc. Now-a-days, super speciality hospitals are being set up by the government at district and sub-divisional HQs for offering better and improved medical and health care services to the people⁸.

Drawbacks in India's healthcare system today include low quality services, corruption, unhappiness with the system, lack of accountability, unethical care, overcrowding in clinics, poor co-operation between public and private sectors, barriers of access to services and medicines, lack of public health knowledge, and low affordability. These drawbacks push wealthier people to use the private healthcare system, which is less accessible to low-income families. This fosters unequal medical facilities among the people with different financial status. Low quality care is prevalent due to misdiagnosis, under-trained health professionals, etc. The government needs to improve enforcement and institutionalise methods of treatment across all the clinics in the nation in order to increase the quality of services. There is also a lack of accountability across both private and public clinics in India. Doctors in the public sector lack full sense of responsibility to treat their patients effectively in comparison with the doctors in private clinics. Impolite interactions from the staff of the clinics usually lead to less effective procedures and more confusion⁸.

In the back-drop of the situation stated above, it is quite clear that the rural people feel helpless to see his/her close relative(s) suffering a lot and moving towards death slowly. Lack of facilities of proper laboratory tests etc. of any patients and absence of specialised doctors make the situation more unfriendly. They become fully confused in the above circumstances and they are compelled to move to big cities with the patients in the hope of arranging necessary medical treatment there. But they face unsympathetic situation and encounter hostile attitude in hospitals to get the patients admitted. If the patients can anyhow be admitted, the hospital(s) crowded with a huge number of patients could not provide due care. The condition and plight of the patient party need to be appreciated, because they are not having any sustainable livelihood and, therefore, it is very difficult for them to handle the health-care issues. Sometimes they, out of anger and frustration, agitate and cause damages to the hospital or nursing home. Finally, they succumb to the hopeless situation and leave everything at the mercy of the almighty. The situation needs to be looked into and the government may take suitable remedial measures to put a proper health care service for the poor in place.

Special efforts are, therefore, required on the part of the government to ensure that the doctors do attend the PHCs, hospitals etc. in rural and semi-rural areas for treatment of the patients regularly. The doctors may be allowed special quota in admission to Post-graduation courses for rendering services in rural areas for certain specified period. At present, some State Governments are providing special pay and allowances/perks to the doctors for working in rural sectors. At the same time, necessary bonds are to be obtained from the medical students who are studying in government institutions with no fees or minimal fees, to the effect that they will have to pay hefty amount for being released to practise elsewhere without rendering the specified rural service. Moreover, they may not be allowed to practice in urban or semi-urban areas in future, if they fail to render required rural service. Simultaneously, similar benefits are also to be allowed to nurses, paramedical staff for their rural services. The government is to set up X-ray, bacteriological, chemical, radiological laboratories etc. at all the block levels with arrangements for collection of samples of bloods etc. in sub-centres at remote villages to facilitate quick diagnosis and treatment of the poor rural patients. All the ICDS, *Anganwadi*, *ASHA* workers are to be motivated through attractive perks, benefits etc. so that they can perform their duties while serving the rural poor people who remain neglected in the health sector for a long time.

FOCUSSING ON THE PROBLEMS AND FINDING OUT SOLUTIONS

Lack of educational facilities, health care and medical services, infrastructural development and other essential services in the rural areas have since crippled the process of rural development in India to a great extent. Rural development is the process of improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people living in rural areas. Focus of rural development has moved from the traditional concept of a broad range of development through agricultural or resource-based businesses to a sustainable approach of providing sustainable livelihood, facilities of education, scope of entrepreneurship, and provisions of physical and social infrastructure in rural regions. It is necessary to identify the exact process to achieve sustainable livelihood for the rural people through a community approach by utilising all the available resources while (i) raising awareness, (ii) increasing employability, (iii) ensuring skill-development, and (iv) providing essential medical and other facilities in the back-drop of the present-day scenario.

The remote villages (along with other similarly placed rural areas) are the greatest victim of RURBAN (Rural-Urban) Divide. The residents of the rural areas suffer from lack of various facilities viz. infrastructural, communication, consistent power supply, knowledge and information meant for technical education, skill development, social awareness etc. Lastly, the Digital Divide which refers to an unfortunate incident of availability of ICT facilities in remote areas has become the ultimate blow. The residents of urban areas continue to avail the benefits of ICT in an easy manner; whereas the people of remote areas can rarely access this facility. The rich ones in these remote areas can afford to have such facility; but the 95% of the residents remains deprived. These people (including students and youths also) do not get the scope of ICT due to lack of proper infrastructure. Interrupted power supply is another curse in these areas. The government is also struck up in this regard due to severe lack of financial back-up and technical provisions. The potentials of the MGNREG scheme

may be tapped to create sustainable infrastructure so as to boost up ICT facilities for the rural people⁹.

In order to improve the situation, we need to adopt an 'out of the box' thinking and approach. There should be a change in the mind set of the people in authorities. The corporate sector offers considerable sum for social development etc. in the shape of funds under Corporate Social Responsibility. The government, in conjunction with the corporate sector, *Panchayats*, NGOs, etc., need to chalk out plans for implementation through basket funding (not through separate singular sporadic approaches by various agencies). Community participation through Joint Rural Management (like Joint Forest Management) while involving unemployed youths, civil society etc. is the need of the hour for achievement of sustainable livelihood for the rural people. Government may take the help of technology and expertise of (i) defence and Para-military organisations (ii) Technological, Institutional and Management back-ups etc. in the process. In India, our scientists have come out with a number of striking technological problem-solving incremental innovations and those can be exploited to bring out radical changes within a reasonable time-frame. Each of the 'Institutes of National Importance' may be approached to adopt one such village for a year and take up a continuous action programme through a regular endeavour.

CONCLUSION

However, the government, various organisations, NGOs etc. have put in efforts, expertise, money etc. and, therefore, brought in vast changes in the scenario in many rural areas; but a huge number of villages are still remain backward. In fact, a proper action plan through a comprehensive approach with an effective linkage with the people has to be taken up to bring about a positive and radical change in these areas. Senior citizens of these areas are hopeful that their kids would be getting all the facilities which were absent during their early years. But the issue is again turning towards an unpalatable turn due to the increasing ill-effects of Digital Divide. The government is required to provide all the necessary infrastructure of ICT in a uniform manner in all the rural areas to bring out the desired changes. The authorities are to take a strong resolution and this resolution is warranted at every stage of the cutting edges of developmental process in our country. Our society should also change its mind-set and arouse conscience among its components. The Think Tank is to act fast and kick start the machinery with the above resolution in an unswerving manner for ensuring a sustainable livelihood for the rural people.

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One Liner: A well-coordinated action programme to be taken up by the government involving all the stakeholders is expected to foster the desired result in near future.
