

CAN THE RURAL POOR PARTICIPATE IN SETTING THE AGENDA TO ERADICATE HUNGER? DO NGOs HAVE A ROLE?

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As a representative of the NGOs (who have a reputation for making several provocative statements, a few that are objective and even these at the wrong time) may I claim the freedom to make a few sets of statements based on the perceptions of an observer, since I am an outsider to the agricultural research family.

Having spent over 25 years in development in various capacities, may I start off with a set of statements based on personal experience as well as on reports from others, ranging from the people who have been involved in the development process to academics and scientists who have contributed to it. The context of these statements is limited to (i) India, (ii) Rural India, (iii) Rainfed rural areas with erratic rainfall from 300 to 600 mm, (iv) undulating terrain with high soil erosion and poor soil quality and to a society which is not homogeneous but is comprised of groups with varied access to, and control of, economic, political and social power. MYRADA has been working in partnership with ICAR, Wastelands Development Board, the Swiss Development Cooperation, German Agro-Action, E.Z.E, PLAN International and with Canadian Organisations such as CIDA, HOPE, and the C.H.F in these arid areas for several years. Many of the observations in this paper are drawn from this experience.

The first set of statements sets the context and provides the reasons that demand a sustained commitment from all of us to ensure that the poor play a role in decisions regarding investment in future agricultural strategy:

- (a) Though at the global level there is evidence that the prices of food grains (cereals) has shown a declining trend over the past ten years, this is not reflected in the rural areas where the prices of cereals (rice, finger and pearl millet, sorghum), as well as of fuel and cooking oil have registered an annual average increase of approximately 15% to 20% between 1985 to 1995. This is the case in four rural areas across three states in Southern India where MYRADA is working. The proportion of daily wages spent on food has also increased significantly during this period. This is why people who were reluctant to join "food for work" programmes (outside drought situations) in the early '80s were willing to do so in

the early 1990s. Future agricultural strategy must focus on increasing the productivity of dryland areas on which the poor depend for their food.

- (b) A recent statement by the Finance Minister of India that the number of people under the poverty line has decreased from 25% in 1987-88 to 19% in 1993-94, has been accepted with a degree of scepticism by many. I am, however, inclined to accept his figures, but with the proviso that there has been significant improvement only in certain parts where the number below the poverty line has fallen even below 15%. There is evidence, however, that in arid areas there has been little improvement and even a rise in the number below the poverty line. Even in areas where there has been significant improvement in livelihoods, the gap between the poorest and others has grown. The dependence on markets for food has also increased due to social pressures, this in turn has increased peoples vulnerability to market fluctuations. A new strategy, therefore, which is adequately diversified to cope with issues specific to the area and to the local configuration in society, is called for. Surveys also indicate that those who have succeeded, attribute their success to their own initiative. Government services (such as agricultural extension in rice and wheat producing areas) which the larger farmers especially with irrigation facilities found useful in the past, is viewed increasingly as irrelevant to further progress. Though infrastructure provided by Government such as roads, electricity and markets have played a significant role, it is not being expanded or maintained at the level required to cope with demand; this is an additional cause of frustration. Besides, scarcity of these resources, reduces the access of the poor to them, since political, economic power and social status, which the poor do not enjoy, play a major role in ensuring access to resources in a situation of scarcity.
- (c) Researchers inform us that the population will exert an extraordinarily heavy pressure on food supply. Even if current productivity growth rates continue, a world-wide shortfall in cereal production of 700 million tons is expected by the year 2025. The shortfall in oilseeds, fuel and other items in the food basket will probably be higher. We are also told that there will be a dramatic increase in population between the years 2005 and 2025, and a decline after that. Whether this increase and decline will be uniform throughout, or whether the increase will be greater and the decline slower in developing countries when compared to the developed (taking into account both natural increase and the potential to migrate which globalisation should promote) is not clear. If it turns out to be so, then the stress on the poor will surely increase, especially if the projected productivity increases in cereals does not materialise in these countries and if the purchasing power of the poor does not register a significant rise.
- (d) We are also told that on a global scale, grain production per person is showing signs of stagnation due to reduction in productivity increase and other factors like water logging in irrigated areas, salinity and increasing extension of cultivation into marginal lands. Studies in India, for example show a marked increase in areas

affected by sodicity and a significant decline in lands held by Government which were allocated for pasture and grazing since they were not fit for cultivation; the decline over a period of ten years (1975-85) is in the range of 5 million ha.; these lands have largely gone under cultivation.

- (e) Researchers also warn us that the size of land holdings will continue to decline; it is expected to be one tenth of a hectare per person by the year 2025 in South Asia. Can we expect productivity increases to compensate for this loss, or will the marginal farmer have to depend almost entirely on the market for his food?
- (f) Is there any need to point out the proportionately heavy erosion of soil from marginal lands on higher slopes which are usually cultivated by the poorer farmers? In MYRADA's Gulbarga project, a number of experts were surprised when the richer farmers cultivating lands lower in a watershed objected to soil erosion control measures higher up, on the grounds that their harvest of soil would be reduced. This is only one example, among many others, that draw attention to the importance of social configuration in development strategy that seeks to focus on the poor.
- (g) There has been no investment in Government Revenue lands even though they have a close interaction with agricultural lands and impact significantly on their productivity. A similar situation prevails with degraded forest lands; there is no strategy to relate the health of these degraded forest lands with sustained productivity in adjacent dryland farms. One has only to read the National Forest Policy of 1988 and various other policy and administrative guidelines to see that the concept of this inter relationship does not hold a significant place. In MYRADA projects covering arid areas of Ananthapur District in Andhra Pradesh and the eastern part of Chitradurga District in Karnataka, the price of one bag of biomass (not farm yard manure) is equivalent to the price of half a bag of urea. The forestlands are bare, except where eucalyptus or acacia auriculaformis plantations have survived; yet people continue to make an effort to meet their food needs in an environment that is decreasingly supportive.
- (h) Increases in agricultural productivity during the past 30 years have been largely restricted to irrigated areas and confined to rice and wheat and, to a limited extent, to major millets. Even where research has focused on dry land crops, it has been usually restricted to single plant improvement without adopting an integrated approach essential to ensuring sustainability in dry areas. In rainfed areas there have been limited increases restricted to a few areas; declines in productivity have been a far more common feature. This had directly affected the livelihoods of the poor.
- (i) The prices of materials used in food production (such as seeds, fertilisers (except urea), animal feeds and fuel) have increased sharply in the context of liberalisation and the removal of subsidies. One must, however, record (contrary to the claims of

a few local politicians), that small farmers who are able to manage their water requirements are happy with the improved quality of seeds supplied by some private companies and even to produce hybrid seed on contract. The sharp increase in prices of fertilisers (except urea) has had a serious impact on productivity in dryland areas. In some parts of South India, such as Kerala, where horticulture is a major livelihood source, farmers have shifted from P and K based fertilisers after the prices increased dramatically, to farmyard manure which is being imported in large quantities from Southern parts of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. With the prices of farmyard manure rising, farmers in these areas have opted to sell F.M instead of applying it to their fields. With decreasing farmyard input, the productivity of dryland farms is bound to decline. The use of P and K based fertilisers in these areas has also declined sharply due to price increases with urea remaining the only inorganic input; this unbalanced use of fertiliser will further decrease the quality of soils in these areas which are already highly vulnerable.

The second set of statements represents largely my beliefs; some are strongly influenced by my vision of society and will, therefore, be disputed, others have been accepted by-and-large.

- (a) Development strategy needs to focus investment on the regeneration and management of natural resources mainly because success in this area creates the greatest potential for improving livelihood opportunities for the poor. The recent focus on productivity of labour, therefore, needs to be matched with a sustained investment in and commitment to the productivity of lands under the Forestry, Revenue and other departments, Water bodies and Biosphere Reserves. Management systems appropriate to each area and asset need to evolve with the support of strategic intervention where required.
- (b) For productivity in dryland agriculture to become sustainable, all lands in a micro watershed must come under one management (not ownership) which reflects all interests. Experience in MYRADA's projects indicates that for such a management system, (involving several groups as well as Government) to emerge and to be effective, requires changes in policy and in attitudes, and adequate investment in time and resources. Experience also indicates that for the poor to benefit, they need to be organised into self-help groups which are based on affinity and homogeneity and which can mobilise their own resources and build networks and linkages; together these factors provide them with the support they need to gain the skills and confidence required to change their lives for the better. Experience also indicates that outside intervention (possibly from an NGO which has a comparative advantage in these areas) will be required to initiate the process (and to intervene strategically as it progresses) leading towards this integrated system of area management as well as to ensure that the poor play an effective role in the process and benefit from it.

- (c) The new mantra of liberalisation and globalisation will bring new opportunities to a few - all among the educated elite, and a host of problems - most of which will impinge on the poor. While this mantra may contain the economic and technical potential required to transform the lives of the elite as well as of the poor, the chances are that the elite alone will benefit since they have greater access to and control of these resources. Unless each of us here makes a serious commitment to ensure that future policy, strategy and investment in agriculture are driven by the socio-economic demands of poor households and unless we commit ourselves to ensure that others act to achieve the same objective, the "Doubly Green Revolution", as some would call it, will have no direct impact on the livelihood resources of the poor. I believe that if we are to play an effective role in achieving this objective, many of us will have to review and renew our skills, change our attitudes towards people's roles, become critical of the value of technical expertise and methodologies to which we have been accustomed, and support individuals in our organisation with a vision and with initiative as well as civic groups including NGOs and parastatal institutions who can contribute towards achieving the same objectives.
- (d) I believe that for agricultural research to be people driven (especially by people farming on drylands under stress) it is not enough to have one or two initiators (showpieces) which depend on the commitment of a few individuals; a new vision is required that impacts throughout the system as well as dynamic leadership (both political and executive) to motivate people to share the same vision and to translate it into objectives and strategies. The new approach should have at least the following features in order to support and sustain a research strategy which gives priority to the needs of dryland farmers:

In terms of extension strategy:

- A shift from a commodity driven approach which has structured extension strategy so far, to a farming systems approach especially in dryland areas, where farmers have evolved traditional mixes in farming systems to meet their needs and to build in insurance against local condition (weather, rainfall patterns, animals etc.).
- A change in the information system; from a monopoly with a didactic and top-down approach, to a system that actively involves private companies, traders, NGOs and agencies dealing with agricultural inputs and markets. This will enable farmers to avail of the most accessible source and to compare and assess information; it will also provide feedback to research from a broad spectrum of sources and perspectives. Presently these intervenors are considered as competitors, profit seekers or just marginalised and kept at arms length. Professional services in communication need to be tapped to ensure that the medium and the message are effective. The message needs to emerge from active interaction with people and be based on the actual experiences of farmers with similar farming systems in dryland areas.

- A shift from standardisation (which has a strong bias towards irrigated cropping systems) in terms of attitudes, extension skills and systems to differentiation in order to meet the specific needs of small and marginal farmers in dryland areas whose farming systems differ not only from area to area, but even within an area, depending on their need, on the location (slope, near roads, towns or forests) of their fields and homesteads, on the depth, quality and type of soils (one micro watershed on the Deccan plateau often has several different types of soils; soil depths also differ significantly restricting horticulture to certain areas in the lower reaches which may not support the strategy to manage soil & water in a watershed), on the grazing lands available, on the availability of inputs, infrastructure and markets, on the credit and labour resources they are able to mobilise and on their yearly assessment of the performance and timing of the monsoon. This requires a broadening of the present spectrum of skills and support services which are currently limited to providing technical knowledge directed to production, and that of a single commodity or sector (often described as a 'go-it-alone' approach) to one that includes skills that support optimum farming systems, that fosters intra-sectoral complementarities (agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry) as well as linkages to institutions providing support to a broad range of activities. Technical knowledge alone is not adequate; farmers also need support to reduce input costs and incomes; they need to identify and exploit potential markets. In one MYRADA project, farmers who were growing flowers were being fleeced by middlemen. Though some of MYRADA staff identified the middlemen as the major obstacle to increases in farmers' incomes, the farmers themselves did not; instead they asked to have a telephone installed to enable them to gain access to information, on a daily basis, about prices in two major flower markets where the flowers were sold. They were provided with a telephone; this enabled them to bargain with the middlemen every day which increased their incomes by over 50%.
- A shift from exclusive focus of research efforts on a single crop in laboratory or institute conditions to one which embraces all factors in order to evolve a synergy that provides the basis on sustained productivity taking into account both dryland farming field conditions and peoples perceptions and needs.
- A shift from an approach dominated by the culture of a 'delivery system' and assessed by targets that are easily quantifiable, to one that provides long term support to build appropriate farmers' institutions which are encouraged to design their own rules and sanctions, their responsibilities and rights, their systems of records and financial control; they need not be registered if the members decide that registration is not necessary and may even make them vulnerable to official harassment. If their decisions are recorded, their financial systems open, their leadership changed regularly and whatever responsibilities they undertake carried out successfully, they need to be treated as viable and legitimate institutions even though they may not conform to the official blueprint. MYRADA's

experience with over 3000 such groups has provided sufficient evidence that if dryland farmers with similar farming systems are supported to form such self help groups whose members are linked on the basis of affinity, they can gain the confidence required to take the initiative during the process of identification and prioritisation of needs (for a project or research agenda) and for planning, budgeting, implementation and sustained management of investment and resources. This extension approach requires skills in institution building, participatory techniques and attitudes that empower farmers' groups.

In terms of extension organisation and staff:

- Different norms for recruitment, compensation and incentives may be required for staff working with dryland farmers than for those working in irrigated areas.
- Administrative systems which are centralised (particularly in finance and administration), where leadership is politicised and morale low, are usually slow to respond to changing situations on the ground, to the need for organisational reform and to provide long term and sustained commitment to achieve objectives. Such institutions find it difficult to foster differentiation and to cope with other civic groups, to adopt participatory methods where people are effectively involved and to shift from a delivery system approach to one that provides support for institution and capacity building which are the fundamental strengths needed if the poor are to participate in an effective and sustained way in any intervention (including agricultural research) that affects their livelihoods. Government institutions involved with agricultural research and extension will have to be decentralised in terms of raising and managing resources as well as in administration and accountability. Professional support to establish and maintain the health of these organisations, similar to the support widely used in private corporations (and increasingly in NGOs), must be availed of and adapted to the organisation's needs. This stress on the need for organisational reform is not misplaced; most of the institutions involved in agriculture were established in the '50s and '60s and have remained frozen in time in terms of agendas, approaches and culture.
- Scientists need adequate resources, time and space, besides the right attitudes and incentives, and to be fully devoted to research (not administration). Schedules and administrative pressures that restrict their involvement with people to occasional PRAs will not achieve the objective of transparent and effective interaction with all sectors of a stratified community; the social demand for public consensus in the presence of outsiders often conditions the results of public techniques used in PRA. Sustained and effective interaction, together with other intervenors (NGOs, Institutions - private and Government involved with agriculture who have comparative advantages that foster and enrich the interaction) is needed if

people are to be involved and the interests of the poorer sectors are to influence the research agenda.

- (e) I believe that essential items in the food basket (including nutrition for children) should be subsidised for the poor. The extension of an effective and regularly stocked public distribution system (instead of political gestures which tend to be short term), available to the poor, especially in arid areas, is an essential component in the strategy to enable the poor to build the basis of their sustainable livelihoods. It will keep them in the area, reduce their vulnerability to disease and to price rises (often artificially created). It will reduce their dependence on the local elite for consumption credit (at exorbitant interest rates) and work. It will also enable them to participate in broader concerns that affect their future instead of being fully immersed in daily survival. By the same token I dare to suggest the scrapping of all anti-poverty schemes which distribute subsidised assets; when they reach the poor, these assets cannot be maintained by them.
- (f) I believe that subsidies for inputs in dryland farming systems (seed, fertilisers, feed, etc.) are necessary. A positive bias towards small and marginal farmers in arid areas is called for.
- (g) I believe that the State needs to invest far more in research in dryland farming systems with special emphasis on local needs and conditions; on cereals which are so far neglected because they have limited or no demand over a large area and because many are considered 'minor'.

And a final set of statements on the role of Participation:

- (a) Participation of all stakeholders in a development project is now generally accepted as an essential condition for achieving a development objective, especially in the context of eradicating poverty and for achieving it in such a way that it is sustained and at comparatively lower costs in the long term. It is also generally accepted that NGOs and civic groups do have a comparative advantage in initiating the process of participation and in building peoples institutions required to sustain the project investment.
- (b) Participation, however, is interpreted differently by each group of people, similar to the blind man and the elephant; the capacity of NGOs to nurture the process of participation also differs; there is also considerable difference in the output of participation depending on the NGOs ideology and the context. As far as the interpretations go, at one end of the spectrum is a group that limits participation to consultation - and here again there are diverse sub-groups: some consider consultation as a means to get people to buy into what they (in their wisdom) have already planned; others consider it an appropriate tool to ensure that all the stakeholders are involved, usually after the project has been identified by bureaucrats and technicians. At the other end of the spectrum is a group that tends towards the position that people have all the wisdom; all one needs is to elicit their participation; this can be done by using the right techniques supported by attitudes of openness and sharing and the skills of listening.

The interpretation of participation I have used in this paper is the following: It relates to several interventions (which utilise various techniques) that openly and primarily intend to initiate a process and which continue to nurture this process till it evolves into appropriate institutions of poor people which they manage and control and through which they design and implement the strategy for their sustainable livelihoods. Initiation of this process requires the use of various methods to motivate people and to win their confidence. The nurturing referred to, is long term and involves support to acquire the skills, confidence and resources to build and maintain viable institutions and linkages among their own groups as well as with other institutions which they need to create a sustainable basis for their livelihoods. It is in the context of this process and capacity building that the research agenda can be set and followed through by sensitive and strategic interventions.

MYRADA's experience has shown that intervention which seeks primarily to collect information (often rapidly) even where the public is involved, which clearly conveys the impression to people that it is short term, and which uses techniques that are limited to visual imagery and mapping, serve a limited purpose; they do not initiate a process and often do not reflect the wealth of diversity, the potential for conflict and the real interests of the poor.

MYRADA's experience in the emergence and growth of peoples' institutions in micro watersheds indicates that for peoples' participation to be effective it required twelve interventions (each using a different technique or method) in the entry phase and another 12 (a few using techniques similar to those in the entry phase) in the planning phase. Though the role of MYRADA declined in the implementation phase its presence was required throughout and even for a period after implementation. The position this paper takes is that for people to participate in research, they must first have the confidence that they can better their livelihoods in a sustainable way. Participation in research, therefore, needs to be preceded by participation in programmes where they have the experience of taking the initiative and gaining control both of their present and their future. To integrate people in agricultural research therefore will demand a change in attitudes and a sustained commitment to strategies and methods with which many involved in agricultural research and extension have not been accustomed.

- (c) MYRADA has had no experience in participative research in agriculture as presently practised, but it has adopted an integrated strategy based on respect for indigenous technologies used in crop, soil and water management, on the inter-relation of all lands in a micro watershed whether private or public and on the empowerment of peoples institutions so that they take over control. The problems, however, that MYRADA experienced in getting these technologies and management systems accepted officially and in integrating them into the plan, as well as in placing a value on initiatives taken by people where local technologies were used, were several and took a long time to overcome. This experience also indicates that relating knowledge gained from research which is often limited to a single crop with that gained from experience which is based on integrated systems, will be a difficult and challenging task.

The Challenges we need to face are mainly in the following areas:

- Our understanding of poverty tends to be negative; we usually hear that the poor need inputs, skills, linkages; intervenors, therefore, carry out what is called a "needs assessment". We need to learn to start with peoples' strengths; they may be few, but they have supported people through periods of stress, caused not only by short, unexpected disasters such as drought, but more importantly by a shrinking resource base - in terms of quality, area and quantity and by policies which obstructed their growth, because they did not support the infrastructure required or give them the freedom to exercise their potential. If dryland farmers have survived in a situation of increasing scarcity, they must be good managers.
- Partly because of the negative content we give poverty, our attitudes towards the poor do not foster respect for their strengths; often we do not even look for them. In MYRADA's study of local technologies in soil and water management, we found that what engineers may propose as technically sound

may not suit people who have multiple objectives. For example when constructing a boulder bund (boulders were available in plenty on the fields), farmers prefer to have a trapezoid shape with the lower side more or less vertical so that it coincides with his boundaries and does not encroach on the neighbour's fields. When constructed with local skills these trapezoid bunds are quite stable contrary to expert opinion. The farmer admits that occasionally a few boulders topple over; but he is willing to invest in the effort to replace them rather than to create enmity by encroaching on his neighbour's fields.

- The analytical tools familiar to researchers are often unable to cope with the fluctuating situation especially in dryland farming systems where people change their strategies for survival regularly; I heard that one researcher found the village 'clumsy' because the changing situation would not fit into his research framework.
- The techniques used to collect information are usually extractive and unfriendly to the poor farmer; they suit the intervenor's skills, time schedules and back-up systems and are often used by young and inexperienced staff. True these techniques are becoming more farmer friendly - especially through the use of PRA, but there is a long way to go; besides though visuals are exciting and farmer friendly, knowledge embedded in religion, tradition and myth is not readily 'visualised'; one may have to 'live' in the village to understand these messages.
- Unless agricultural strategy also tackles policies, laws and regulations that inhibit livelihood operations, it will fail to be effective and sustainable. Laws governing the ownership and use of lands, policies affecting the prices of inputs need to be supportive of dryland farming systems; in many areas they are not. Agricultural strategy also has to take into account pressures arising from changing family values and demands as the culture of a consumer society makes inroads. A recent survey made by MYRADA indicates not only a significant annual rise in prices of articles in the food basket, but also a marked decrease in production of food for home consumption, and increasing dependence on the market for staple foods. There is also a sharp fall in production of traditional cereals as people shift to rice (from finger millet and sorghum) which is mainly purchased. Rice in some villages is a status symbol. The pressures to shift to cash crops, where possible, to meet consumption demands which are increasingly being conditioned by the mass media and preferences of younger women, are strong. The traditional knowledge that supported the production of traditional staples and adaptive strategies in farming systems is consequently dying out, as the need to pass it on to the younger generation declines.

- The research agenda therefore, must relate to resource-poor areas; it must be focused to support farming systems which are sustainable (through integration, diversification and a degree of self reliance which lessens their vulnerability to exploitation and erratic rainfall), which do not require high capital investment to sustain (which the community cannot provide from its limited capital base) or skills which are far beyond local potential in the medium term. The research agenda must also focus on intensive farming which raises productivity of crops and livestock and other livelihood resources (like fodder, fibre, fuel, fertiliser, flowers & fowl) that are suitable to dry areas.

There are also several challenges that farmers will have to face; however, it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe them in detail. But brief mention must be made. For example farmers must face the obstacles that local politicians may try to place in the processes leading to watershed management by people if they perceive that the new institutions will force them to be more transparent in their dealings and more accountable to people. Farmers also will have to realise that dryland farming, if it is to be sustainable and productive will require much greater attention than many are willing to provide at present. Planting of trees for biomass, collection of biomass, mulching, composting, ploughing before the rains regular bunding and gully plugging are some other necessary interventions which will require time. The argument that farmers are fully occupied is not always borne out by facts; they have time on their hands in most areas except when they migrate for short periods.

