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**PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT: SOME PERSPECTIVES
FROM GRASS-ROOTS EXPERIENCES**

by

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PREFACE

In recent years, especially since the early 1970s, there has been an increasing interest in participatory approaches to development. There is a growing consensus at national and international levels about the importance of participation both as a means and as an objective of development. This consensus, however, obscures significant differences among organizations and specialists concerning the concepts of development and participation. The purpose of this paper is to pinpoint these differences and to explore some characteristics of a participatory approach based on empowerment of excluded social groups. This is done by a study of selected grass-roots initiatives in some Asian and African countries.

The nine initiatives discussed in the paper seek to promote an egalitarian and self-reliant pattern of social and economic development. Two initiatives (Grameen Bank and Small Farmers' Development Programme) use credit for the rural poor as the principal mechanism for attaining these objectives. Self-employed Women's Association and the Working Women's Forum rely primarily on organizing poor self-employed women mainly in urban slums. Sarilakas and the Participatory Institute for Development Alternatives seek to promote economic and social advance through the formation of peasant groups and organizations of rural workers. The emphasis of the three African initiatives — Six-S, ORAP and ADRI — is on mobilization of resources through self-help and co-operative efforts.

The nine initiatives display differences as well as similarities. One common aspect is that the initiation of development activities is preceded by a more or less intensive preparatory phase involving interaction with and among the people concerned. This may serve to instill discipline, build confidence, raise consciousness, develop critical and analytical ability and promote group solidarity and democratic practices.

Another common feature is the emphasis placed on formation of base or primary groups. These provide a forum for dialogue and

reflection, reduce individual vulnerability and insecurity, facilitate planning and implementation of social and economic activities, serve as receiving mechanisms for government services and enhance the members' bargaining power.

The self-reliant character of these organizations is reflected in the priority given to development of manual, technical and analytical skills of the members, the institution of collective savings and social security schemes and increasing self-management of their activities by the members themselves. On the economic front, the initiatives have brought about significant improvements in production, incomes, employment and living standards. These have been facilitated by provision of credit; enhanced bargaining power resulting in higher wages, better prices for produce and enforcement of labour and tenancy laws; and pooling of resources and developing co-operative marketing, production, savings and banking schemes. The indirect effects of these initiatives have conferred economic benefits on the non-member low-income groups.

The initiatives have further served to promote the social priorities of the members. There have been improvements in access to services such as schooling, health, literacy, family planning and shelter. Perhaps more important is the assault made by members, especially in the south Asian initiatives, on ancient and anti-social practices such as dowry, child marriage, caste and ethnic prejudice. There is also evidence of decline in drunkenness, gambling, crime and wife-beating. More positively, slow but profound changes are occurring in the social status and economic position of women.

These initiatives have also served to stimulate the democratic cause through growth of independent organizations of the poor, development of democratic practices in the running and management of their activities, and promotion of technical, managerial and intellectual capabilities of the members.

Not all the initiatives have been equally successful. There is a great deal of variation in the quality of performance between and within the different units of these initiatives. Practically all of them had to overcome many difficulties and most continue to

face problems of finance, organization, know-how, opposition from vested interests, etc. Grass-roots participatory initiatives suffer from some well-known weaknesses as models of development but the experiences studied here show that they also offer some profoundly important insights and lessons for development theory and practice.

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June 1988

Introduction 1/

In recent years, especially since the early 1970s, there has been an increasing interest in participatory approaches to development. This interest is manifested both at the national and international levels and appears to be shared by individuals and institutions of widely divergent ideologies and backgrounds. At the international level, most multilateral and bilateral agencies have recognized the importance of participation both as a means and as an objective of development. Likewise, national plans in many countries pay a great deal of attention to the need for a participatory pattern of development. However, as tends to happen in situations of this sort, this growing consensus owes much to certain ambiguities in the concept of participation. Different authors and organizations give different interpretations to this concept. Often these differences are a reflection of differences over the concept of development itself.

The notion of participation may be examined from different levels and perspectives. One distinction relates to participation in the public domain, work place and at home. The first aspect refers to all matters discussed and decided in public institutions — local organizations, national governments, parliaments, parties, etc. The second concerns factories, offices, plantations, farms and other work places. The third dimension refers to family relations and work at home. The latter is largely neglected in most discussions on participation. Yet, in relation to the time spent in different places, "home democracy" is at least as important as "work democracy" and is a crucial determinant of the welfare of some members of the family, especially the women and children.

A different but slightly overlapping distinction concerns participation at local, national and international levels. Although there has been a good deal of discussion of participation promotion at the local and national levels, much less attention has been given to the implications of a participatory approach at the global level. 2/

In view of the linkages and interrelationships between developments at these different levels, a satisfactory analysis of participation should be based on a recognition of interdependence among the different levels of aggregation. This is, however, a complex and daunting undertaking. This article has a more limited and modest purpose — namely, to shed some light on the participatory approach to development through a study of selected grass-roots initiatives in a few Asian and African countries. This is done in the belief that these experiences yield fresh and exciting perspectives on the meaning and processes of development and contain within them elements of a self-reliant, egalitarian and participatory approach to development. They, therefore, offer a rich field to draw lessons from with a view to strengthening the quality of development efforts in rich and poor countries alike.

In the light of the preceding remarks, the paper begins with a discussion of some alternative concepts of development and participation. This is followed by a brief description of nine grass-roots initiatives whose experiences are used subsequently to illustrate some aspects of participatory approaches to development. The paper then examines the themes of participatory processes and institutional framework, and of self-reliance and the role of outside assistance. There is then an analysis of these initiatives as economic enterprises, agencies of social reform and schools for democracy. The concluding section focuses on their strengths and limitations as alternative development models. The gender issues are discussed in various sections of the paper.

A. Alternative concepts of development and participation

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