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Chapter 15

Experiences of Aid Agencies in the TAR Shared at the Round Table Meeting

Pema Gyamtsho

ICIMOD, Kathmandu, Nepal

Nyima Tashi

TAAAS, Lhasa, TAR, P. R. China

INTRODUCTION

The Round Table Meeting (RTM) was held so that various development and aid agencies working in Tibet could share their experiences. It was moderated by Dr. Nyima Tashi, Vice-President of TAAAS, and attended by representatives from the Bridge Foundation, Canadian International Development Assistance (CIDA), EU (European Union), The Mountain Institute(TMI), The Swiss Red Cross, the Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund, and World Concern. The organisations were involved in a wide range of socioeconomic development programmes in Tibet, including rural development, education, and health services. The participants were asked to share their experiences and the major challenges they faced in implementing their activities in the field. The RTM was conducted in an open session which provided the representatives with an opportunity to respond to questions from the other participants at the Conference.

Development planning, approach, and strategy

The participants stated that the examples of agricultural development, from Himachal Pradesh, India, and of integrated rural development from Pakistan are relevant for TAR. They emphasised that community mobilisation and institution building were fundamental prerequisites for sustainable development and lauded the approach of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP), Pakistan, in addressing gender issues by including education for women. There was general agreement that educating women must be given high priority since "an educated mother will educate the whole family."

The participants at the RTM also acknowledged that cultural dimensions needed to be considered from the inception of development programmes

to ensure that interventions are acceptable to the beneficiaries. They stressed the need for adequate time for consulting local communities to ensure that their views and priorities are taken into account. The representative from World Concern mentioned the difficulty associated with communication between the various stakeholders, which is not just limited to communications between foreign aid workers and the beneficiary communities but also between the Chinese and local officials, as a result of language and cultural differences. This problem is aggravated by the vast distances involved in travelling, making it nearly impossible to bring people together for joint meetings.

The representative from the EU pointed out that it is not realistic to expect results from a few years of work and that commitment from donors and development partners should be extended over several phases. Due to lack of follow-up and continuity, successful innovations and useful lessons are lost before they produce tangible impacts. He also emphasised the importance of an integrated and coordinated approach among the various agencies in the field.

The participants also stressed the need for improved coordination among the line agencies of the government involved in providing services to the rural people. They mentioned that the services are disconnected and isolated, even among closely-related sectors such as livestock and agriculture. Similarly, the energy crisis in remote areas cannot be solved by a single sector and requires the cooperation of several sectors, e.g., energy, forests, and livestock, in order to exploit the potentials of various sources.

Education services

In the education sector, some of the participants thought that, even though they helped build schools, they faced difficulties in encouraging parents to send children to school because of the lack of employment opportunities for educated youth. Even those who have gone to school become misfits and do not engage themselves productively. Hence, it was agreed that creating employment opportunities and equipping youth with skills through vocational training should be given high priority.

Health services

The organisations involved in medical aid emphasised the fact that development is linked to health and vice versa. According to them, "poor health results in poor productivity." The Swiss Red Cross representative noted the remarkable progress that had been made in controlling diseases like smallpox and leprosy in the last few decades, but stated that

there are still major problems. Of these, the two most important health problems at present are related to iodine deficiency and lack of clean drinking water. The soils of Tibet have no iodine, and since intelligence quotient (IQ) levels suffer from lack of iodine, the IQ level of those badly affected by iodine deficiency is only 29, which explains why there are so many 'kugpas' (mentally challenged people) around. The average IQ level in iodine deficient areas is only 85 compared to an average of 100 in non-deficient areas. Therefore supply of iodised salt and iodised capsules should be given high priority to reduce the number of such cases.

The Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund (TPAF) also shared its experiences in linking health and development: and the representative said that, although Tibet has good conditions for health as it is difficult for germs to survive the cold harsh environment, its people still suffer from a variety of ailments. However, many health problems are due to bad behaviour and practices: poor feeding habits of children, poor hygiene, bad sanitation, poor maternal health care, and poor road safety. As a result, most casualties are related to malnutrition in children (40%), complications after child-birth for women, and road accidents for men. As doctors almost always focus on curative rather than preventative measures, there is a lack of awareness and knowledge on the part of rural people about preventative measures, and the development agencies need to address this. There is an eminent threat of spreading infectious diseases such as Hepatitis B through unsafe injections in rural clinics. Other problems are associated with poor food habits and sanitation such as epilepsy and tapeworm infections.

Income generation

The participants acknowledged the challenges of promoting income generation in remote rural communities, in particular the difficulties of providing access to credit and investment capital. This is also the challenge faced by the Agricultural Bank of China throughout Tibet, i.e., how to provide credit to remote villages. The TPAF had started a micro-finance scheme six years ago for very remote communities and disbursed over 300,000 dollars to over 1,400 women and men in seven townships and three prefectures. While it initially targeted men it has now shifted to targeting women as the repayment rate from women is very high at 90%. Currently it is supporting groups of six or seven women to take up processing village dairy products or woollen garments for the county markets and this is known as the 'Mengshapa' system. In this respect the village representatives play very important roles in organising the groups and facilitating repayment. The use of women leaders as repayment

officials has proved to be very effective. It is of utmost importance to provide training to the recipients. This training should be over a period of three to four days to enable the beneficiaries to understand which of the activities and repayment systems they should choose and to identify problems and solutions. It also enables them to present their proposals to their communities. The interest rate charged to the groups is three per cent and the income from it is used to finance a community education fund. The communities are, however, encouraged to decide how best to use the interest money, and the choices range from paying village doctors to financing visits to other townships to see what other activities can be undertaken. This scheme is a good example of how international donors, the government, and banks can work together to increase income generation in rural areas.

Infrastructural development

The participants noted that, whereas the quality of construction in Lhasa was generally very good, construction in remote villages was very poor. This was attributed to the difficulty of monitoring and the lack of accountability on the part of contractors. Even where construction was good, there was a common inability to maintain the structures and accessories because of lack of resources and capacity at local level. It was suggested that a better procedure for selecting contractors and awarding contracts should be adopted by placing more responsibility on local bodies and beneficiaries. In addition adequate resources should be allocated for skill training to develop the minimum capacity for operating and maintaining services.

Rural-urban migration

Mitigating rural to urban migration is a complex task. One can either encourage people to stay in rural areas by providing them with schools, hospitals, and employment – or help them to migrate to areas with better opportunities. Out-migration from rural areas should not be viewed always as negative, since the decrease in population reduces pressure on natural resources, thus enabling the population remaining behind to have better standards of living. The government's scheme for constructing resettlement villages, which allows for consolidation of the scattered population into viable units for establishing schools, hospitals, and other amenities, was felt to be the right strategy. Combined with provision of vocational training to develop skills, as carried out by the TPAF in Nakchu in relation to construction skills, it has proved to be a winning strategy. However, there was general consensus that alternative options to traditional livelihoods should be provided in rural areas, and migration should not be advocated as the only means.

Focus on women

All the representatives from the agencies shared the view that women must be specifically targeted as the primary conduit for reaching out to the community as a whole whether in terms of access to education, health, micro-credit, or rural infrastructural development. In this respect, the success of the AKRSP in Pakistan and the group lending scheme adopted by the Agricultural Bank of China needed to be replicated. For example, solving the problem of malnutrition among children in Tibet would not occur by simply supplying vitamins and food supplements, but by educating the mothers to feed their children properly. Similarly, the high maternal mortality rates can only be addressed by educating women about reproductive health and hygiene at home.

Donor coordination

The representatives of the donor agencies felt that the TAR government should play a more active role in coordinating the activities of the donor agencies, including the work of NGOs, so that the delivery of services and development initiatives would be much more effective. It could also ensure a better spread of the aid basket among the counties and prefectures to bring about more equitable development. At present, while many agencies work in some counties, there are none in others. In this context, the donor community has already approached the Foreign Affairs' Bureau about establishing a forum for holding donor coordination meetings.

Conclusions

The Chairman wrapped up the meeting and concluded that it had been a very useful session which had highlighted many of the problems faced by the donor agencies and NGOs in Tibet. He assured them that their views were very pertinent and would be brought up with the authorities concerned in the TAR so that the donor assistance and involvement would be more effective and meaningful in future.