

Sustainable Rural Development and Climate Change in the Asia- Pacific Region

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Abstract

Rural development is critically important for the entire Asia-Pacific region as most countries in the region are predominantly rural. However, since the mid-1980s rural development has gradually lost its priority due to the poor performance of rural support programmes, new economic policies, and a shift in the development paradigm. The emerging issues around climate change have brought rural development and the role of governments back to the forefront of development policy. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the prospective changes in rural development in the context of global change in general, and climate change in particular, with a view to suggesting future directions for rural development strategies. It also looks at the role of governments in facilitating rural development in the context of climate change and economic globalisation. It first examines the changing perspectives and framework conditions of rural development in the Asia-Pacific region, then deals with climate change issues and their implications for the lives and livelihoods of rural people, followed by a look at the emerging role of governments in promoting sustainable rural development in the context of global change.

Framework conditions for rural development

The framework conditions for rural development have changed significantly over the last several decades due to demographic changes, rapid urbanisation, globalisation, and liberalisation, combined with technological developments and improved communication facilities. Rural-urban interactions and the movement of goods, services, and labour have increased all over the world. This process has promoted new market access through remittances, a greater diversity of livelihood options, and integrated many isolated local economies into national, regional, and global markets and economies. A major structural transformation has taken place in the rural sector including changes to the demographic and economic structure, and to communications, mobility, and technology.

Rural livelihoods

Rural livelihoods are now more diverse. Although agriculture has remained a prime source of rural livelihoods, income from different off-farm activities and remittances has been increasing promisingly. The young labour force has been leaving rural areas to gain higher income. Rural-urban interaction and exchange have increased significantly, thus, reducing the traditional rural-urban hiatus and differences in cultural values. This has changed the framework conditions for rural development with profound implications for future rural

development policies and strategies. Climate change has also brought new challenges and opportunities to rural areas, definitively influencing the shaping of future policies for rural development.

Climate change

Climate change has substantial implications for rural development in the Asia-Pacific region. A vast majority of the population live in rural areas and depend heavily on agriculture, forestry, fisheries, livestock and other climate sensitive sectors. Climate change poses a serious threat to livelihoods and food security, as well as enhancing risks and vulnerabilities through the increased frequency of natural disasters and extreme weather events. Particularly mountains and coastal areas are highly vulnerable to climate change. The melting of snow and ice in the Himalayas, the changing hydrological regimes of the rivers originating in these mountains, and extreme and erratic weather conditions all have serious implications, not only for the people living in the Himalayan region, but also for the more than a billion people living in the downstream watershed of the region's ten largest rivers, including the Ganges, Indus, Brahmaputra, and Mekong.

It has now been clearly established that climate change, together with an increasing demand for freshwater, will increase water stress in many Asia-Pacific countries, particularly in South Asia. This will be critically important to agricultural production, food security, and rural development in the future. Increasing water stress combined with increasing uncertainty and extreme weather events will affect food production and will enhance food insecurity across the entire South Asian region. According to preliminary findings, the non-availability of irrigation water will reduce yields in South Asia by around 20 per cent by 2035. Air pollution and changes in the monsoon may further reduce productivity as the Indian monsoon may be unstable due to climate change. Increased natural hazards and extreme weather events may also increase risks and vulnerabilities in rural areas and accelerate rural-urban migration and the number of environmental refugees in urban areas. Climate change, water stress, and the current global food crisis, energy crisis, and financial crisis have posed new challenges and opportunities, and raised questions about the validity of the prevailing neoliberal approach to poverty reduction and sustainable rural development. It is now clear that the market alone cannot solve these problems, and in particular, it cannot address the issues of poverty, environmental conservation, climate protection, market failure, institutional development, and good governance. Governments have to play a special role in promoting rural development by creating a conducive policy environment, and through resource mobilisation, regulating the private sector and NGOs, and facilitating adaptation and mitigation measures for climate change and economic globalisation.

Role of governments

While climate change has been posing serious challenges, it has also created new opportunities for rural livelihoods through better management of natural ecosystems and their services. Carbon trading through Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), and Payment for Environmental Services (PES) could be important sources of income for rural communities in the near future, if appropriate policy, institutional, and legal support is provided by governments. This calls for new policy, institutional, legal, knowledge, and technological support, and for appropriate property rights for the institutionalisation of ecosystem services and the promotion of niche products with an improved potential in urban markets. Without strong support from the government, rural people will not be able to tap these opportunities and the elite may capture resources such as land, water, and forests and associated access to ecosystem services.

Conclusion and recommendations

Rural development continues to be a very important priority for the entire Asia-Pacific region. Although urbanisation is increasing rapidly and the contribution of agriculture GDP has been declining over the years, rural areas will still remain the main sector supporting the majority of people in the region. Climate change requires a new perception of the importance of ecosystem services and water.

However, rural development strategies can no longer be perceived in the same economic context as in the 1960s and 1970s. The rural development and livelihood strategies of the future have to be understood as a continuum of urbanised and globalised systems. Rural development is a complex process. It requires simultaneous action in various sectors: agriculture, non-agriculture, infrastructure, and technology, as well as human resource development. It also requires mitigation and adaptation to climate change, as well as the creation of a dynamic environment for transforming the rural economy. As a result, rural development must be properly integrated into the national economy. Ministries of rural development alone cannot promote sustainable rural development; a coordinated effort is required. Knowledge and information sharing, including early warning of natural disasters and climatic events, is essential to build the resilience of local livelihoods and communities to climate change.