

## Using Assets and Partnerships to Address Rural Poverty

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### 1. Access to Assets

Poverty is the daily challenge of 800 million people struggling to meet their basic food requirements. Sixty percent are rural people who live in environmentally sensitive areas of low productivity. Vast numbers are landless or near-landless. Those numbers are continuing to rise as the landless are joined by those being displaced due to processes such as privatization of common property land, expansion of commercial agriculture, and ethnic conflicts over land. In 1960, the top 20 percent of the world's population had incomes 30 times as high as the poorest 20 percent. Today, the gap is 60 times.

For both rural and urban households, the food security challenge is growing as the poverty gap widens, both within and between nations. As the gap in access to productive resources grows, it becomes a growing threat to household food security, environmental sustainability, and international peace. It is a dramatic indicator of imbalances that contribute to a culture of exclusion that denies the poor access to opportunities for development.

It is ironic that those who are food producers, largely farm laborers, are among those most vulnerable to food insecurity. For the rural poor, secure access to land provides the most realistic opportunity for rural people to improve their livelihoods and develop assets that can reduce their vulnerabilities.

Secure access to assets determines the incentives and opportunities for the rural poor to

- ensure their household food security,
- earn income by producing marketable surpluses,
- accumulate capital and assets,
- access financial services,
- invest in alternative income-generating strategies,
- use their own labor to sustain the natural resource base;
- build reserves to cope with drought and preserve their assets during periods of agricultural stress, and
- transfer assets to reduce intergenerational poverty.

However, in their quest for food security, the rural poor often have little choice but to use their limited resources extensively. Their negligible natural and capital assets compel them to adopt survival strategies with short time horizons. They become excluded from productive opportunities by ill-defined or nonexistent property rights, limited access to financial services and markets, inadequate security against natural disasters, lack of education and training, and lack of participation in decision making. Understandably, when property rights are lacking or insecure, farmers cannot be sure they will receive benefits and thereby lack incentives to make investments for the longer term.

Lack of secure access to land puts the future food security and livelihood of rural people at risk. However, the vicious cycle that links hunger and poverty to agriculture and land can be broken, in large measure by ensuring that the rural poor gain secure access to land, water, credit, technology, and training. Pro-poor policies and people-centered investments to gain and maintain access to land, water, forests, and fisheries can improve livelihood systems and widen food security and employment options for the rural poor.

Interactions between poverty, food security, and resource rights are starting to bring about a refocusing of national and international agendas on a broadening of land tenure as well as the resource rights of fishers and coastal communities, forest dwellers, pastoralists, and other traditional resource users.

## **2. From Parallel Actions to a Common Agenda**

This paper examines an innovative coalition of civil society, governmental, and intergovernmental organizations whose mandate is specifically focused on the needs of the rural poor. It describes the origins, vision, and activities of the Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty. While this paper is based on the experience of the Popular Coalition, the underlying knowledge can inform other organizations, regardless of their sectoral interests, about the modalities that can contribute to harnessing the energies of different actors into a coordinated mechanism for reducing poverty. The lessons learned are transferable to academic, business community, civil society, aid provider, government, and intergovernmental efforts to forge pro-poor collaborations.

### **a. Lessons from experience**

The history of poverty reduction strategies has shown that both government-led development without the active support of civil society, and civil society movements without the institutional and enabling support of government, have both failed. The experience of the 1990s has confirmed that active participation by communities in the planning and implementation of development policies and programs is an essential prerequisite for sustainable human development and poverty reduction. The record of official development assistance affirms that sustainability requires the empowerment of people as agents of their own development. These lessons point to the need for revitalized alliances linking governments to their civil society organizations, coupled with the moral and financial persuasion of the international community.

International institutions with a mandate to foster development often lack the necessary community involvement. At the same time, civil society organizations often lack access to the levers of decision making and policy setting that directly affect their livelihood systems.

In a global marketplace that is often beyond any one nation's regulatory control, national governments are struggling to fulfill their responsibilities to establish legislation and serve the well-being of their citizens. The dramatic rise in the number and nature of civil society organizations reflects the growing demand by the public to participate in setting policies and in designing the programs and services of governments. There is rising public concern about social justice, equity, and livelihood opportunities for the poor and marginalized.

### **b. Searching for a common agenda and a commitment**

Over the past 25 years, international leaders and heads of state have searched for a common global agenda through a well-known series of summits. Each summit, from the Stockholm Conference on the Environment in 1972 to the World Food Summit in 1996, examined a pending crisis: the environment, development, energy, population, and food. Of the many conclusions drawn at these conclaves, the one of most significance is that there are no separate crises: they are all one and the same. An analysis of summit declarations finds that the single most common cause and effect is poverty.

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Summit declarations consistently name poverty, resulting from unequal access to and use of natural resources, as the most important and widespread cause and effect of any crisis. If the protocols were blended into one international plan, there would be a call for equitable distribution of wealth, access by the poor to productive resources, sufficient participation by the poor in decisions that affect their daily lives, and reform of macroeconomic policies that adversely affect the poor.

A review of these protocols reveals the recurring description of the poor as lacking assets, being vulnerable to agricultural and economic shocks, lacking capacity (training and knowledge) to participate in decision making that affects their livelihoods, and suffering from an intergenerational sense of being powerless to change their condition. This continuing situation casts grave doubts on the political commitments behind summit outcomes such as “the right to development” and similar adjurations to put people at the center of the development process. Putting these global agreements into action is a need of the highest order.

Despite these convincing reasons, few countries have undertaken major agrarian reform measures. In many countries, the political and economic difficulties associated with agrarian reform have been formidable, and efforts to implement pro-poor policies are often met with substantive political and economic obstacles. For example, even in countries committed to improving access to land and security of tenure, implementation is often slow,

delayed, or manipulated by vested interests and the landed class. In other cases, a lack of beneficiary participation has limited the impact and sustainability of reform efforts. The challenge to implementing agrarian reform is rooted in political courage to make pro-poor decisions, however difficult that may be.

Even in the face of these failures, several factors are converging to produce more favorable enabling conditions: the increasing efforts of civil society, the rise of democratic institutions, and increased awareness of the political consequences of neglecting poverty. There are also indications that economic liberalization and institutional reform may be reducing or eliminating distortions that have historically favored the powerful. For the rural poor, these indications may mean greater access to land, assuming that government policies and market conditions will eliminate subsidies that have favored large-scale farmers. Land taxes can be a further incentive, by making the practice of holding land for speculative purposes more costly. However, commitments require action.

### **c. Local actions are necessary, but not sufficient**

The past has shown that approaching poverty through narrow interventions, as a means to initiate broader policy dialogue and institutional reform, is generally not successful. It has also been recognized that the work of civil society, governments, and intergovernmental organizations has most often been parallel but separate, because of historical events that have created cleavages that continue to be difficult to bridge.

New partnerships need to be built on a foundation consisting of information sharing, dialogue involving affected groups, consensus building, and collaborative formulation of policy. New pro-poor partnerships benefit from joint pilot projects that can help to build new ways of work and better target existing resources to the poor.

Clearly, systemic policy and regulatory frameworks that prevent the poor from building assets, both physical and human, have a critical bearing on the social fabric of societies and on overall economic development. From the standpoint of the poor, past failures of trickle-down economics must give way to bottom-up participation. For vast numbers of rural poor, empowerment means securing resource rights and fostering direct participation in the integrated planning and management of land, water, and common property. Resource management strategies in the past tended to neglect social, economic, and institutional factors and concentrated almost exclusively on technical aspects. Urban and periurban poverty strategies have also aimed for a “technical fix.” Today, rural decision makers are beginning to understand interactions between poverty, land rights, and sustainable use of natural resources. Expansion of this understanding has, in recent years, resulted in a gradual refocusing of national and international agendas on revival of agrarian reform.

Globalization is changing the old adage of “Think Globally, Act Locally” to “Act Locally and Globally.” The challenges of poverty and their threat to peace, security, and the environment require advocacy and action from the local to the international level. Two key tools for engagement of a broad coalition of cross-sectoral interests are knowledge and capacity

building. It is here that the Popular Coalition is innovative. The Popular Coalition recognizes that effective multi-stakeholder alliances begin with understanding the programs of all partners. This is because the real value of a coalition is in adding knowledge and capacity to its partners, capturing opportunities for synergy, establishing new ways of collaboration between diverse partners, and influencing one another to incorporate into their organizations improvements that arise through coalition analysis, demonstration projects, and action research.

Formation of the Popular Coalition has widened the space for dialogue involving civil society, governmental, and intergovernmental organizations. For the Popular Coalition, this also means influence at the highest levels of the United Nations system. The terms of reference of the United Nations Administrative Coordinating Committee on Food Security and Rural Development include a mandate to support the program of action of The Popular Coalition to Eradicate Hunger and Poverty. Accordingly, the Popular Coalition can support and link work of community-based organizations in local decision making with influence at the highest international levels.

#### **d. From parallel actions to a common strategy**

Frequently, civil society organizations, governments, intergovernmental and international financial institutions, and United Nations agencies are pursuing what seem to be parallel paths and objectives.

The 1995 Conference on Hunger and Poverty, sponsored by the International Fund for Agricultural Development, brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including bilateral agencies, civil society organizations, government officials, intergovernmental organizations, international financial institutions, and nongovernment organizations (NGOs). It produced a consolidated analysis of the constraints on sustainable human development. It called for urgent action to revive agrarian reform on national and international agendas. The organizations made a commitment to form a coalition of equals that would unite their common concerns into one agenda to empower the rural poor through improved access to productive assets. They determined that the Popular Coalition should give particular emphasis to the experience of civil society in gaining resource rights and participating in decision making.

The Popular Coalition established itself as a distinct mechanism with separate governance by a Coalition Executive Council comprised of seven regional civil society/NGO networks and five intergovernmental partners. Seven civil society representatives are selected by their peers and represent the African, Asia/Pacific, Caribbean, European, Latin American, Middle East, North African, and North American regions. Intergovernmental partners are the International Fund for Agricultural Development, which serves as the international focal point; the Food and Agriculture Organization; the World Food Program; the World Bank; and the European Commission. While these are the current governors, coalition partners include additional civil society and intergovernmental organizations.

The Popular Coalition aims to build strategic and innovative alliances among these diverse development organizations in order to empower the rural poor through improved access to assets and effective participation in decision making affecting their livelihood systems.

The Popular Coalition is not a new organization, but it is a new mechanism. Some key lessons from its establishment, which time is proving to have been essential to its current strategic and operational progress, are that

- the stakeholders initially came together to share their analysis of the problematic;
- their analysis evolved a common perspective on conditions and strategies for action;
- this common perspective revealed that required policy and institutional reforms and actions were beyond the spheres and specialties of any one stakeholder; and
- the resulting coalition needed to be a neutral space where dialogue and differences could be negotiated, with a flexible framework for engagement.

It should be noted that the Popular Coalition is not an extension of any one of its partners. This helps keep any partner from regarding it as something it is helping another organization to do. Instead, as a distinct mechanism, its roles and responsibilities are those of its owners, i.e., each and every partner.

The strength of the Popular Coalition comes from the different spheres of influence of its partners, which range from community-based organizations to international institutions and United Nations agencies. It has significant capacity to make a difference by melding the existing policies and resources of its partners into coherent and well-targeted country programs. The vision is for the partners to incorporate the successes and lessons learned from initiatives that are jointly undertaken through the Popular Coalition into their own organizations.

#### **e. Forming alliances committed to pro-poor choices**

While a generalization, it is all too frequently true that poverty, like agrarian reform, is seen to be a technical matter. However poverty, like agrarian reform, is about sustainable development. Sustainable human development is essentially about people and the way they organize their social, economic, and political systems to make critical decisions on who has the right to use which resources or access which employment opportunities, in which ways, for how long, and for which purposes.

Accordingly, overcoming poverty is primarily about changing inequitable relationships. First, it aims to change relationships obstructing the poor from acquiring assets. Second, it aims to change the current culture of exclusion so that the poor gain access to opportunities, such as education and training, credit, technology, markets, other productive services, and income-earning possibilities. Third, it aims for the poor to be active participants in the development of government policies and programs affecting their communities and livelihoods.

However, obstacles facing the poor, such as resource rights of the land-poor, touch on fundamental inequities. Much cultivated, fertile land is held by a small number of powerful landowners and elites. It follows that tenurial security and property rights can reduce landholding inequalities, prevent rural conflicts, contribute to improved food security, and increase incomes of the rural poor. Secure access to land can catalyze practices of sustainable resource use and soil management, including combating desertification.

Today, poverty reduction, expressed in rural areas as agrarian reform, is returning to the agenda based on a recognition of its importance to economic, social, and political stability. Asset ownership by the poor is increasingly recognized as being essential to sustained and broad-based economic growth. Worldwide, social justice and equity are becoming common values, and good governance and political stability are being accepted as prerequisites to economic growth and the eradication of poverty.

The Popular Coalition's program of action is informed by three key lessons from the past:

- a broad-based and comprehensive approach to pro-poor reform involves consensus building and policy dialogue;
- political sensitivities to powerful vested interests will require that the viability of proposed approaches be effectively demonstrated before policymakers will consider adopting reform on the scale needed to meaningfully reduce poverty; and
- community organizations need to be strengthened in order to become effective interlocutors with government in policy development and program delivery.

#### **f. Instruments for common action**

From the experience of the Popular Coalition, a first instrument for common action has been formation of a knowledge network to capture lessons learned from the practical work of civil society. The Popular Coalition Agrarian Reform Network (ARNet) equips communities attempting to address a particular issue with experience from those who have overcome similar constraints elsewhere. This knowledge strengthens policy dialogue between civil society organizations and their governments. Further knowledge also results from forums and studies on emerging resource access methodologies undertaken by a cross-section of coalition partners.

The Popular Coalition also supports the replication and scaling up of successful initiatives as a way of demonstrating the benefits of incorporating these experiences and underlying principles into public policies and programs. Through the Coalition, international, regional, national, and grassroots organizations are gaining from one other's knowledge, and collaborating to promote successful practices, policies, and innovative institutional arrangements linking civil society and government.

The second instrument of the Popular Coalition is the Community Empowerment Facility, which supports local groups in building their own institutional and analytical capacity.

Communities will become better equipped to place their particular issues on the agenda with their civic and political officials. The Community Empowerment Facility

- strengthens the negotiating ability of the poor, especially women and indigenous peoples, to achieve secure access to land, including common property, water, and associated support services;
- facilitates community participation in policy dialogue and representation in local governance;
- builds on traditional organizations and community practices;
- strengthens people's organizations in solidarity with others;
- supports policy and institutional reforms;
- facilitates conflict resolution processes;
- replicates and scales up pro-poor models; and
- disseminates best practices and lessons learned.

The Popular Coalition's third instrument, a program to popularize agrarian reform, recognizes the need for wider political space. The aim is to place issues in the public domain, in both south and north. The goal is to build consensus among many stakeholders on policies and strategies for implementation.

#### **g. Lessons arising from the formation of the popular coalition**

A confluence of factors contributed to the commitment to form The Popular Coalition, to actively participate in its implementation, and to jointly solicit required resources. The primary enabling processes and understandings include the following:

- open debate and process of stakeholder analysis of the problematic/problems involved;
- full participation by all stakeholders in establishing a vision for an international conference to examine issues;
- emergence of a common perspective on constraints to eradicating hunger and poverty;
- a consensus view of strategic policy and institutional reforms required for action;
- a common program of specific actions in contrast to a goal of broad-based institutional collaboration;
- an understanding that necessary actions require the joint efforts of civil society, governments, and international-level organizations;
- recognition that a critical combination of complementary capacities, spheres of influence, resources, and networking necessary to engage diverse constituencies was not feasible by any one stakeholder on its own;
- a need for neutral, flexible space for dialogue and action that would enhance the views of each partner organization, but would respect rights and orientation of each, would not reflect a dominance by any one partner, and would also not commit all partners to the outcome of debate on each and every issue or subject;
- a commitment to strengthen civil society, especially community-based organizations, because civil society experience too often remains localized and thereby does not get replicated, scaled-up, analyzed, and incorporated into public policies, and conversely,

local communities often lack access to information, remain inadequately prepared, and are consulted only on an occasional basis, such as during project preparation after overarching policies have been determined;

- the need to mobilize political will based on a broad-based public understanding of the issues involved; and
- an appreciation and mutual acceptance of mandates of partners, on the basis of which it was decided to establish, not a new organization but a coalition based on exchanging knowledge, building capacity, and supporting innovation and action research that is aimed at transferring lessons learned to its partners for incorporation into their policies and programs, in order to strengthen their mandates to eradicate hunger and poverty.

Today, the way forward is framed by globalization. It is important to recognize that, although markets can distribute goods and services, they cannot address the issues of social justice, equity, and opportunity for the poor. It is here that civil society, governmental, and intergovernmental organizations need to build wider common space for engaging in public issues of development, especially eradication of hunger and poverty. Developing new ways of work is often difficult, especially where NGOs have aggressively mobilized to change government policies. In some cases the first step is to overcome a past where the term nongovernment was seen to be the same as anti-government. Building trust among civil society, governmental, and intergovernmental organizations is a first step.

