

Rural Development: The Meaning

Although policy makers and the development community have widely used the phrase “rural development,” what constitutes rural development seems to have changed significantly over time. How did the concept of “rural development” evolve over time in the past 3 decades? What does “inclusive rural development” mean? Addressing these two basic interrelated questions is important to put the issues relating to inclusive rural development in perspective.

The concept of rural development has changed significantly during the last 3 decades.⁶ Until the 1970s, rural development was synonymous with agricultural development and, hence, focused on increasing agricultural production. This focus seems to have been driven primarily by the interests of industrialization to extract surpluses from the agriculture sector to reinforce industrialization.⁷ With the focus on increasing agricultural production, the stated objective of most countries was to promote smallholder agriculture. Over time, this smallholder agriculture-centric concept of rural development underwent changes. By the early 1980s, according to Harris,⁸ the World Bank defined it as “...a strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of a specific group of people—the rural poor.” Four major factors appear to have influenced the change: increased concerns about the persistent and deepening of rural poverty; changing views on the meaning of the concept of development itself; emergence of a more diversified rural economy in which rural nonfarm enterprises play an increasingly important

Until the 1970s, rural development was synonymous with agricultural development and, hence, focused on increasing agricultural production.

⁶ Harris. 1982; Chambers. 1983; ADB. 2000.

⁷ Francks, et al. 1999, 121.

⁸ Harris. 1982, 15.

role; and increased recognition of the importance of reducing the non-income dimensions of poverty to achieve sustainable improvements in the socioeconomic well-being of the poor. The establishment of the Millennium Development Goals has significantly reinforced the concerns about non-income poverty. With the paradigm shifts in economic development from growth to broadly defined “development,” the concept of rural development has begun to be used in a broader sense. It is also more specific, as Harris⁹ noted “in the sense that it focuses (in its rhetoric, and in principle) particularly on poverty and inequality.” In more recent years, increased concerns on the environmental aspects of economic growth have also influenced the changes. Today’s concept of rural development is fundamentally different from that used about 3 or 4 decades ago. The concept now encompasses “concerns that go well beyond improvements in growth, income, and output. The concerns include an assessment of changes in the quality of life, broadly defined to include improvement in health and nutrition, education, environmentally safe living conditions, and reduction in gender and income inequalities.”¹⁰ Today there seems to be a universal consensus that the ultimate objective of rural development is to improve the quality of life of rural people. This makes it essential to go beyond the income-related factors such as prices, production, and productivity to a range of non-income factors that influence quality of life and hence inclusiveness of rural development.

More specifically, inclusive rural development covers three different but interrelated dimensions.

Inclusive rural development is a more specific concept than the concept of rural development. In broad terms, inclusive rural development is about improving the quality of life of all members of rural society (Figure 1). More specifically, inclusive rural development covers three different but interrelated dimensions. The first is the economic dimension that encompasses providing both capacity and opportunities for the poor and low-income rural households in particular to benefit from the economic growth process in such a way that their average incomes grow at a higher rate than the growth of average incomes in the sector as a whole.¹¹ The economic dimension also includes measures to reduce intra- and inter-sectoral income inequalities to reasonable levels. Second is the social dimension of supporting social development of poor and low-income households and

⁹ Harris. 1982, 15.

¹⁰ Chino. 2000, xiii.

¹¹ UNDP. 2005, 65.

disadvantaged groups, eliminating inequalities in social indicators, promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment, and providing social safety nets for vulnerable groups. Third is the political dimension of improving opportunities for the poor and low-income people in rural areas, including women and ethnic minorities, to effectively and equally participate in the political processes at the village level and beyond compared with any other categories of the population within and outside rural areas.

Figure 1: Three Dimensions of Inclusive Rural Development

