

# THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN RURAL ASIA

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# FOREWORD

An economic transformation has occurred in much of rural Asia since the Asian Development Bank (ADB) last undertook a survey of the region in 1976. The rural economy has become increasingly linked to a rapidly integrating world economy, and rural society in Asia faces new opportunities and challenges.

The transformation of rural Asia has also been accompanied by some troubling developments. While large parts of the region have prospered, Asia remains home to the majority of the world's poor. Growing inequalities and rising expectations in many parts of rural Asia have increased the urgency of tackling the problems of rural poverty. The rapid exploitation of natural resources is threatening the sustainability of the drive for higher productivity and incomes in some parts of rural Asia, and is, in general, affecting the quality of life in the entire region.

These developments have altered the concept of rural development to encompass 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 improvements in health and nutrition, education, environmentally safe living conditions, and reduction in gender and income inequalities. At the same time the policy environment has changed dramatically. Thus, there has arisen a need to identify ways in which governments, the development community at large, and ADB in particular, can offer more effective financial and policy support for Asian rural development in the new century.

In response to this situation, ADB has undertaken a study to examine the achievements and prospects of rural Asia and to provide a vision for the future of agriculture and rural development in Asia into the next century. The objective of the

study was to identify, for ADB's developing member countries in Asia, policy and investment priorities that will promote sustainable development and improve economic and social conditions in the rural sector.

The study was designed as a team effort, using ADB staff and international experts under the guidance of an ADB interdepartmental steering committee. To address the diverse issues satisfactorily and in a comprehensive manner, five thematic subject areas were identified to provide the analytical and empirical background on which the study's recommendations would be based. Working groups of ADB staff were set up to define broadly the scope and coverage of each of the themes. The five working groups acted as counterparts to international experts recruited to prepare the background reports, providing guidance to the experts and reviewing their work to ensure high-quality output.

A panel of external advisers from the international research community was constituted to review and comment on the approach and methodology of the study and the terms of reference for each of these background reports. The external advisers also reviewed the draft reports. In addition, external reviewers, prominent members of academe and senior policymakers, were appointed to review each of the background reports and provide expert guidance.

The preparation of the background reports included four workshops held at ADB's headquarters in Manila: an inception workshop in May 1998; two interim workshops in November 1998 and January 1999, respectively, to review progress; and a final workshop in March 1999 at which the background reports were presented by their authors to a large group of participants comprising senior policymakers from ADB's developing member countries, international organizations, international and locally based nongovernment organizations, donor agencies, members of academe, and ADB staff.

The five background reports, of which this volume is one, have now been published by Oxford University Press. The titles and authors of the other volumes are:

*Transforming the Rural Asian Economy: The Unfinished Revolution*

Mark W. Rosegrant and Peter B. R. Hazell

*The Growth and Sustainability of Agriculture in Asia*  
Mingsarn Santikarn Kaosa-ard and Benjavan Rerkasem, with contributions by Shelley Grasty, Apichart Kaosa-ard, Sunil S. Pednekar, Kanok Rerkasem, and Paul Auger

*Rural Financial Markets in Asia: Policies, Paradigms, and Performance*

Richard L. Meyer and Geetha Nagarajan

*The Evolving Roles of State, Private, and Local Actors in Rural Asia*

Ammar Siamwalla, with contributions by Alex Brillantes, Somsak Chunharas, Colin MacAndrews, Andrew MacIntyre, and Frederick Roche

The results and recommendations from the study were presented at a seminar during ADB's 32nd Annual Meeting in Manila. These have since been published by ADB as a book entitled *Rural Asia: Beyond the Green Revolution*.

The findings from the study will provide a basis for future discussions between ADB and its developing member countries on ways to eradicate poverty and improve the quality of life in rural Asia. The volumes in this series should prove useful to all those concerned with improving the economic and social conditions of rural populations in Asia through sustainable development.



Tadao Chino  
President

Asian Development Bank

## PREFACE

This study of the quality of life in rural Asia lies at the intersection of two distinct, independent, and evolving lines of inquiry: first, the benchmark studies sponsored by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in the late 1960s and late 1970s on Asian agriculture and rural Asia; and second, an emerging body of more broadly based academic work on the nature, measurement, and process of social and economic development.

The increasing attention being paid to quality of life is apparent in both sets of literature. ADB's first study (*Asian Agricultural Survey*; ADB, 1969) focused on agriculture, with relatively low priority given to poverty reduction and quality of life per se. The second ADB study (*Rural Asia: Challenge and Opportunity*; ADB, 1978), while maintaining an emphasis on agriculture, took clear note of the well-being of Asia's rural people as a central goal of the development process. The earlier development literature was more narrowly focused on income as the main determinant of quality of life, a perspective that has broadened in recent years to include other measures: income is increasingly seen as but one means to development, the true ends of which are the capacity to establish entitlements over such commodities as food and education, the ability to enjoy a long and healthy life, freedom, and security.

The present study endeavors to expand the focus of ADB's inquiries into the living standards of Asia's rural peoples, drawing upon recent advances in development thinking that assess development performance from the standpoint of its impact on quality of life, and focusing on the links between its numerous aspects and the broader institutional context.

We would especially like to thank two colleagues for their help in preparing different parts of the manuscript: David Steven (Defining the Quality of Life, and extremely helpful comments and suggestions throughout) and Eben Kenah (Coping With Adversity: A Case Study of Flooding in Bangladesh).

In addition, we received valuable comments and suggestions and other substantive assistance from the following individuals: Srilatha Batliwala, Tim Brown, Lakshmi Reddy Bloom, David Canning, Rueben Dudley, John Gallup, Sofia Gruskin, Riaz Khan, Michael Mandler, Richard Marlink, Andrew Mellinger, Marc Mitchell, John Pollock, Ashok Rai, Amala Reddy, Amulya Reddy, Marguerite Robinson, Larry Rosenberg, W. R. Simpson, Karen Stanecki, Adam Storeygard, Andrew Warner, Eric Weinstein, and Anita Zaidi.

Conducting the focus groups we use to illustrate several themes in the book would not have been possible without local colleagues in the countries we visited. We are extremely grateful to Ajay Mahal of the National Council for Applied Economic Research in New Delhi, Napaporn Havanon of the Srinakharinwirot University in Bangkok, and Wang Jiayi of Northwest Normal University in Lanzhou, People's Republic of China. Not only did they and their able teams of moderators and interpreters help us understand the nuances of the group discussions and local cultures, but they were also gracious and generous hosts.

Outstanding research assistance was provided by David Evans, Bryan Graham, Stephanie Koch, and Dilip Parajuli.

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