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May 20, 1997

Since the inception of the South Asia Poverty Alleviation programme (RAS/96/600) in August 1994, Sri Lanka has remained a bit of an enigma. Whereas Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan have in due course of time clearly chosen the direction in which they would like RAS/96/600 to go, Sri Lanka is still pondering the way.

Of course, there is a history behind this caution. Sri Lanka has an old and rich tradition of social mobilization, practised both by government and NGOs. The plethora of organizations at the village level is unbelievable and to further compound the matters, programmes of successive governments like Janasaviya and currently Samurdhi have made matters even more complex at the grassroots. But one fact is acknowledged by government officials and NGOs alike that all these programmes haven't had the desired effect on reducing poverty. In fact evidence is produced to show an increase in the incidence of poverty in Sri Lanka.

Although there are so many organizations at the village level but the grassroots still remain unorganized, so very essential to assault poverty. The Samurdhi managers and animaters openly admit that all their efforts fail to reach the poorest of the poor (of course, in case of Sri Lanka, this is a relative term because one can hardly see abject poverty in the country). The better off and the influentials always succeed in hijacking whatever comes from government. The richest of them call themselves poor and claim Samurdhi benefits. Some managers complained that government also keeps on forcing benefits which are not even required. Many of the Samurdhi beneficiaries would be happy and willing to accept an adequate line of credit. The result of these programmes and many other development programmes has been a dependency syndrome of the worst kind.

Under the circumstances all that RAS/96/600 has done in Sri Lanka since August 1995, is to concentrate on enterprise development by providing training and credit. In few places they have tried a holistic approach of development also. However, by and large the focus has been on training, for example, the work plan for the second quarter of 1997 envisages 69 types of training of 3,275 villagers. What impact and what results such short exposures will produce remains to be seen. All this training is compressed within 102 days.

This time my discussion with the Resident Representative, his Deputy and Assistant and Programme Officer before commencement of the tour of the programme area, was extremely beneficial to me. Arve strongly advocated that RAS/96/600 should mainly try to make the available

services accessible to the people. He rightly maintained that the resources available with government programmes, donor assisted projects such as IRDP and NGOs, were substantial and there was no need for RAS/96/600 to seek additional resources. No one can contest the logic or soundness of this argument. Unfortunately in every South Asian country, that I have worked in, it is the same situation but the best of efforts with tremendous goodwill and willingness on part of senior administrators and managers, has not brought about any appreciable change in the situation. The way government programmes, including donor assisted, are tied with political, regional and administrative considerations that despite best efforts nothing worthwhile happens. In the meanwhile the rural poor lose patience and hope and the support organization its credibility.

It is for this reason that South Asia Poverty Alleviation programme, on the basis of the recommendations of the Independent Commission on Poverty Alleviation, made social mobilization as the centre piece of its poverty alleviation strategy. However, the definition of social mobilization by the Commission is somewhat different to what is commonly understood and has been traditionally followed in South Asian countries. In the context of the South Asian Poverty Alleviation Programme (RAS/96/600), social mobilization means harnessing peoples potential to undertake development themselves. Of course, it is based on the assumption (because of overwhelming evidence produced before the Commission) that rural people, especially the poor, are willing to do many things themselves which will improve their situation. However, to harness the potential of the people, they need social guidance, namely, how to organize themselves because individually they cannot achieve anything; how to identify genuine and selfless leaders and activists who could help in harnessing peoples potential; how to identify at household, group and community levels what individuals, groups and communities, as a whole, are willing to do; how to undertake feasibility studies and make cost estimates of resources required to implement development initiatives individuals, groups and communities are willing to undertake, sustain and maintain; and how to arrange and facilitate flow of resources both from within and outside the community to undertake the prioritized development initiatives. RAS/96/600 thus sees itself in this context, as the support organization to provide social guidance for harnessing the potential of the people to help themselves.

My field visit included meetings with the RAS/96/600 team, District Secretary (Government Agent) Nuwara Eliya, Divisional Secretary (AGAs) Kothmale, Hanguranketha and Walapne; participation in Committee of Agencies and Beneficiaries for Poverty Alleviation at District level (CABPAD); discussion with Kothmale Rural Development Foundation (KRDF) newly inducted office bearers; attendance at Hanguranketha Rural Support Programme (HRSP) review workshop; participation in Hanguranketha Divisional level meeting of Samurdhi District Coordinator, the newly elected Chairman Pradishik Sabha, divisional staff, NGO representatives presided by the Divisional Secretary and above all dialogues with villagers at Delta, Hellebaddigama, Helsrigama, Kadalorapitiya and Marthiwela.

I was very happy to meet the three new additions to the RAS/96/600 team namely, Dr. Anura Herath (M&E), Mr. Kuluthinga (Engineering) and Mr. Michael (Admin. & Finance). For the benefit of the new members of the team, we recapitulated the strategy of RAS/96/600 in harnessing peoples potential to help themselves. There seemed a unanimity of views and willingness to work as a team. I quoted the example of other South Asian countries where RAS/96/600 worked as a team, instead of dispensing itself thinly and getting the desired results. I hoped that the Sri Lankan team would also forge the same kind of camaraderie and focused approach towards social mobilization. Initially, the team agreed to work together as a whole in atleast one Grama Sevaka Division (GSD) in each of the three divisions where South Asian Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP) has been initiated. Thereafter the Senior Social Organizer (SSO) of each Division will do the follow up and expansion in their respective Divisions with backup at least for one week in a month in each Division by the Core Team comprising the NPC, the M&E and the Engineer, occasionally joined by the Admin. & Finance to give him an idea of the field conditions.

The KRDF (formerly Jivasakhti Padanama) was picked up by RAS/96/600 as a partner NGO for Kothmale Division. That the Foundation was in shambles when RAS/96/600 stepped in to resurrect it was already known to everyone. The audit report simply confirms what was already in public knowledge. But the fact that since the partnership with RAS/96/600, the Foundation has shown remarkable improvement and the newly elected office bearers have expressed their determination not only to keep the Foundation on the right track, as it has been for the last two years, but also to make an all out effort to recover the defaulted amount which does not total more than a couple of hundred thousand of Rs.2.8 million loaned. The individual default varies between Rs.1,000 to 5,000 and should be recoverable if a determined effort is made.

The suggestion that KRDF should be bypassed and RAS/96/600 should have direct link with Zones and CBOs, would mean giving up an excellent opportunity to develop KRDF into a support organization which in 5-7 years time should be able to subsume the support functions of the RAS/96/600 team. However, to achieve this objective, KRDF has to have professional management. It has the Divisional Secretary as Chairman of its advisory committee, which is an excellent arrangement in securing government involvement. However, there is an urgent need for a professional chief executive of KRDF who could ensure proper maintenance of records and management of the affairs of the grassroots unit, the zonal clusters and the Foundation. On an experimental basis, I would suggest that the SSO of the Division should be entrusted this task, of course, supported by the Core Team. No outsider will be able to provide the leadership, coordination and vision to KRDF or HRSP or WRSP (when it is formed) than a member of the RAS/96/600 team. They should have this vision firmly in front of them that in 5-7 years, these bodies should take over the functions of RAS/96/600 on a sustainable basis, which means they should be able to generate enough income of their own to pay their staff, including a Chief Executive, not necessarily at UNOPS scale.

As to the involvement of a member of RAS/96/600 team in the affairs of the KRDF, as reported, gives only one side of the story. The fact that the person was assigned this charge of Executive Director of the Kothmale Janasakhi Padanama for two years, in addition to his full time job of an assistant divisional secretary (AGA) and did entitle him to an honorarium was not looked into. However, as a gesture of goodwill, he has offered in writing to refund the amount in twelve monthly installments beginning June 1, 1997, which seems to be acceptable to all parties concerned and I strongly recommend that the matter should be closed. Since joining RAS/96/600 team, the person has given an excellent account of himself and proved himself a real asset to the South Asian Poverty Alleviation Programme.

My meetings with government officials were extremely cordial and positive. From District Secretary (GA) Mr. Hethiarachchi to Divisional Secretary (M/S Abeykoon, Dissanayake and Jayatilleke) to other government functionaries, there was a tremendous willingness to collaborate and cooperate with RAS/96/600 and a candid realization that something needs to be done to have an impact of the programmes at the grassroots, which somehow had so far proved elusive. For example, the profile of Hanguranketha Division gives an idea of the development initiatives typically underway in a Division:

Total population	100,000
Total No. of households	23,000
Total No. of GSD	128
Annual total Samurdhi Grant	60million rupees
Annual total Samurdhi Fund	30million rupees
Annual total IRDP Fund	7 million rupees
Annual total Decentralized Budget	4 million rupees
Annual Total Provincial Council Fund	4 million rupees
Annual total Local Councils Fund	- NA -
Annual total NGO Resources	5 million rupees

Thus of the above amounts, the Samurdhi grant of Rs.60 million is tied but the remaining 50 million can be utilized on the basis of locally identified initiatives. Mr. Dissanayake in his speech, eulogized what he had seen in Northern Areas of Pakistan and expressed his resolve to follow the vision. With the collaboration of RAS/96/600, he said, Happawara demonstrated how a holistic approach can be implemented and now such initiatives have been taken in 68 GS Division. 805 groups have been formed comprising 4,750 members who have saved SLK Rs.800,000 and on lent Rs.600,000. All existing NGOs have also formed Integrated Support Organizations, with representative from each

NGO, at the GS Division to oversee and coordinate development activities. In addition, the groups have been provided a credit line of Rs.689,000 for seed beans, heifers, hand-paper making, paddy seed and bee-keeping. A grant of Rs. 2.2 million has been provided for undertaking physical infrastructure works such as drinking water supply, access roads, nursery etc. Hanguranketha in my view is on the verge of take off if right kind of support and requisite resources are provided. There is a highly motivated population with a highly dedicated support team and Divisional administration and there is no reason why this cannot all be harnessed to have sustainable equitable growth.

The most encouraging and inspiring part of my visit to Sri Lanka were the dialogues with the communities. The 300 strong who met me at Delta, representing the equal number of households from the 6 hamlets of the G.S. Division had no problem in understanding my message (ably translated by Dayaratne) of harnessing their potential to help themselves. On my request for volunteers who could arrange hamlet and neighbourhood meetings, over the next two days, there were no less than 20 volunteers from the six hamlets who patiently waited in a queue to give their names and time and venue of the gathering. It was all sparked by the request from one woman in the audience that she was homeless and wanted the programme to provide her a house. On the question as to whose responsibility should it be: entirely of the State or the community or neighbourhood where she resides have also some obligation. A mason from her hamlet volunteered to help her build the house. The others also offered help. But the issue was how to institutionalize such an arrangement so that no hamlet, no neighbourhood has homeless people. At Maruthuwela, where Neel literally killed me by perching himself with the villagers at a height which I could not cope with. After a mile long climb, very steep at times, I gave up and sent message to him to bring the villagers down. Perhaps God or Lord Buddha had ordained that I should stop where I did. It was one of the poorest houses I had seen in Sri Lanka. Two families with six children were living in abject poverty. Poverty was visible. When the crowd came down, we were taken just 50 yards away to a palatial house, compared to the one we had just left, where we were seated on comfortable cushioned chairs to have our dialogue with the assembled throng who had identified a drinking water scheme, costing Rs.450,000 as their priority need to alleviate poverty. I asked them how was this going to alleviate the poverty of the household I had just come from. There was silence and embarrassment and immediate admission of the failure of the project to directly reduce poverty, the focus of RAS/96/600. No one was denying the importance of the project they had identified but when sensitized to the need for prioritization, they agreed that for alleviating poverty this project was not the top priority. They agreed that on my next visit that poor household should be treated as the benchmark for ascertaining improvements and impact on poverty situation. We teased Dr. Herath to accept the challenge. Perhaps in every organization of the community, we can identify such a benchmark.

The sum total of all these dialogues was preparation of an investment in organization plan. Each neighbourhood or hamlet identified their activists who undertook to consult each household to

ascertain what they were willing to do themselves which would lead to bettering their situation and improving their standard of living. If for certain activities, a group expressed the desire to do so through group formation or for some activities the whole neighbourhood or hamlet expressed the willingness, it was agreed that these activities would also form part of the plan but the first priority would be given to the household level plan, second to the group plan and third to the community level plan.

Dr. Anura Herath articulated it most aptly by calling it a plan of portfolio of opportunities as against a plan of portfolio of demands. He opined that there is a very thin line between opportunities and demands and the success of the investments in organization plan will depend on careful understanding of this distinction. He felt that since independence we have been planning on the basis of demands, it is time that we base it on opportunities available to the people and thereby helping them harness their potential to help themselves.

The Team, led by Dayaratne, agreed to jointly formulate such a plan for one G.S. Division in each of the three Divisions. This would give an idea of the resources required to implement such plans. It would be not only futile but suicidal for South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme to prepare plans by involving people and be unable to implement for lack of resources. For demonstration and influencing policy, it is imperative that RAS/96/600 team should have resources at its disposal to respond to the opportunities identified by the people, without delay, otherwise it would engender an irreparable credibility gap. It is only after demonstration that we can expect other agencies and government to reallocate their resources. I would urge an allocation of US\$ 5 million over the next three years before we undertake investment plans for GSDs in the three Divisions. In the absence of such an allocation or promise of such resources, we should not undertake planning exercise beyond the three GSDs that the team is in the process of preparing over the next two months. A request for resources, under the regional umbrella, made now may become available early next year. In the alternative if the Country Office does opt for the investment in organization plans for all the GSDs in the three Divisions, it might have to raise funds from other sources.

My meeting with Dr. Ratanayake at dinner, so kindly hosted by him, was a very productive one. He evinced keen interest in the initiatives being undertaken by RAS/96/600 and suggested linking up with similar experiment being done under Samurdhi. He also mentioned the desirability of interaction with policy makers and practitioners and academicians about the activities of South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme.

At the end of the field visits, the Resident Representative alongwith the ARR and the Programme Officer, very kindly discussed with me and Dayaratne our impressions of the visit. I reiterated my view of the desirability to have the Programme Office within the programme area and not to shift it outside to Kandy. I felt that the monitoring mechanism being developed by Dr. Anura Herath was

adequate. However, the need was to undertake benchmark, case studies and impact studies as urgently as possible, in addition to preparation of quarterly and annual progress reports, which so long have been done by the NPC himself. I am glad that now we have a competent person to look after M&E, the documentation will be taken in hand in a systematic way.

Arve's suggestion that we should encourage exposure to and advice from other successful programmes, such as, SEWA, Rajasthan Women's Programme, Grameen, BRAC etc., for RAS/96/600 team and village activists, was most welcome. I mentioned the likelihood of Japanese funding to South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme for such initiatives. In the meanwhile, if the Country Office, in consultation with the RAS/96/600 team, should come up with any specific proposal in this regard, it could be financed out of RAS/96/600 funds with the approval of UNOPS Kuala Lumpur.

I am most grateful to Arve for the time he gave me during my visit to Sri Lanka and thanks to Richard and Sagirit for joining the discussions. My special thanks to Asoka for the keen interest and guidance he is providing to RAS/96/600. I am most indebted to Dayaratne and his team for the excellent arrangements made for my field visit.

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