

Improving productivity through integrated community development

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The APO has been playing a leading catalytic role in supporting the transformation of the rural economies of its members by enhancing the capabilities of their institutions and empowering their rural populations to improve productivity and real incomes in an equitable, environmentally sustainable manner. To achieve this, the Integrated Community Development (ICD) Program was introduced in 1996, which consolidated all projects and support initiatives of the APO to spread the productivity movement at grassroots level in all members.

In its initial years the ICD Program emphasized institution building and social capital formation in rural communities. Projects were designed to build the capacities of national institutions and their representatives working in rural communities to promote the empowerment and participation of all stakeholders in the village, regional, and national development processes. Projects provided participants with relevant tools and techniques for participatory community development planning and project development and extension arms of governmental and nongovernmental organizations with facilitation skills to make them more effective agents of change in rural communities. Embedded in those projects were the concepts and principles of Green Productivity and various techniques for application of the concept in the rural community setting. Participants in ICD projects were also exposed to a wide selection of rural community development models in Asia.

Subsequently, APO projects and support under the ICD Program were focused on the evolving priorities of members, which emphasized addressing poverty, unemployment, and low-income groups. In response, the APO designed projects supporting the creation of rural enterprises and self-reliance anchored on the use of natural, human, and cultural resources that were indigenous to the community. The cluster approach to community development as exemplified by the One Village, One Product (OVOP) model was adopted. OVOP was promoted as a movement rather than just a one-shot project. The popularity of the OVOP model, which started over 25 years ago in Oita prefecture, Japan,

stems from its holistic approach to harnessing local resources and engaging the entire community in the process of developing distinct products that can be marketed in both local and overseas markets. Several member countries are now in the various stages of implementing OVOP or a variant of this model, and some of them have reaped the benefits in terms of higher incomes and more prosperous villages.



OVOP project in Cambodia: Women making local silk handicrafts. Photo APO/J. Bernardo.

In recent years, the APO has also embarked on promoting more inclusive, sustainable community-based enterprise development emphasizing multiple stakeholder participation, especially in the management of communal resources and sharing the benefits of development more equitably. This entailed the development of rural entrepreneurship and enhancing the access of small and micro entrepreneurs to non-traditional credit and financial services. A leading initiative of the APO in this direction was the introduction of community-based rural tourism (CBRT). This initiative recognizes that several APO members have immense potential for creating economic opportunities, jobs, and incomes by increasing overall rural productivity through tourism. The APO's advocacy in its projects was premised on the idea that to de-

velop a viable rural tourism industry, the whole community should be involved and the benefits should be evenly distributed among all stakeholders to ensure sustained participation and cooperation.

Projects under CBRT covered agrotourism and ecotourism. With APO support, agrotourism is now increasingly becoming an important component in the tourism development strategy in a number of countries, and many more are becoming interested in the concept. It is being pursued as value addition to farming and as allied businesses enabling farmers and rural communities to harness the optimal benefits of the multifunctional nature of agriculture. Thus, some countries now consciously develop their agriculture sector not only for food, fiber, and livestock production but also for tourism. Agrotourism in the region attracts both domestic and international visitors who want to experience a taste of farm and countryside life. It provides visitors with an opportunity to appreciate agricultural and country landscapes, participate in different activities ranging from harvesting fruit to fishing, and even becoming involved in actual farming operations.




Agrotourism in Indonesia: Touring a tea-processing facility. Photo APO/J. Bernardo.

Ecotourism is not an entirely new subject, but the APO's advocacy has been creating significant interest in it among member countries. In the past, the thrust of many tourism development plans among members was mainstream, which involved packages of good tourism infrastructure, entertainment facilities, and other social amenities. However, recent trends show that unique wildlife and their habitats combined with scenic mountainous terrain are becoming increasingly popular attractions for local and international tourists in member countries. Ecotourism is now seen as a viable enterprise with potential positive contributions to the rural population and the conservation of endangered biological resources. Nature tourists bring money to spend, which could provide resources for governments for conservation and effective regulatory activities while at the same time creating jobs and incomes for households and communities. Satellite activities such as craft industries, transportation, and food services are stimulated, also generating revenues and foreign exchange. Thus, ecotourism is benefitting both the environment and local and national economies. However, evidence in some countries has shown that unplanned, poorly managed ecotourism development can seriously harm the environment, wildlife, and biodiversity. In areas where local communities are not reaping the benefits from tourist receipts, no incentive is seen for protecting and conserving the environment and they continue to generate livelihoods through poaching and wanton extraction of wildlife. The excessive influx of tourists and uncontrolled tourism infrastructure development, especially in fragile ecosystems, also result in waste generation, pollution, and destruction of natural habitats and animal sanctuaries. Thus, the APO's efforts in this area will continue under its current strategic directions.

Overall, APO initiatives under the ICD Program were well received by members. The participatory planning approach, OVOP movement, and CBRT have become inherent elements of some members' development strategy for enhancing business op-

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portunities in rural areas, creating jobs, and increasing incomes anchored on the utilization of natural resource endowments of communities and the culture and skills of local people, and achieving more holistic, balanced rural development. The benefits of the OVOP movement and CBRT development, when appropriately pursued, are therefore tremendous. They have huge potential to increase overall productivity in rural areas by mobilizing positive externalities associated with agriculture and natural resources development and conservation. 

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