

RURAL LIFE IMPROVEMENT

Rural life can be extremely harsh in areas where climatic and other conditions are not ideal for agricultural pursuits. To improve the lives of the people affected, various rural development programs were introduced by many countries. Some APO member countries have focused on rural life improvement from the very beginning of their rural/community development efforts. In these countries, agricultural productivity enhancement and rural life improvement were pursued simultaneously as two sides of the same coin. Their success is now an inspiration and encouragement to others seeking to improve the quality of life of their people. Japan is a good example. After World War II, the Japanese economy was in ruins, and rural life was particularly hard. To help alleviate the situation, innovative measures were undertaken, with one of the more prominent being the Rural Life Improvement Program. It introduced the following innovative approaches that are now widely adopted by those involved in development work: participatory development, involvement of women, decentralization of authority, and kaizen or continuous improvement.

To enable other member countries to learn from the Japanese experience in rural life improvement, the APO organized a seminar on “Rural Life Improvement for Community Development” in Japan, 22-26 April 2002. Seventeen participants from 11 member countries attended the seminar.

At the seminar, it was generally agreed that the experiences of one country several decades ago could not simply be transferred for application in others today for a host of reasons. For example, women were the main target of Japan’s Rural Life Improvement Program as it embraced a wide range of activities associated with them, such as modification of cooking stoves, better nutrition, implementation of water-supply projects, and the processing of local products. Such an approach would be difficult to implement in some other countries because of the low status of women in society.

Japan, it was pointed out, had a strong motivation to carry out the program, i.e., to rebuild the nation and to stave off a looming famine. This desperate situation provided the impetus that pushed the Rural Life Improvement Program forward. Other member countries today would have to find their own compelling reasons to promote a similar program.

In conjunction with the seminar and with the support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the APO organized a half-day symposium on “Rural Life Improvement in Japan and Rural Development in Developing Countries” in Tokyo on 24 April. More than 180 people, including the seminar participants, took part.

APO Secretary-General Takashi Tajima spoke at the opening session of the symposium. He pointed out that because of the Rural Life Improvement



The panel discussion in progress (L-R): Mr. Tsubota, Dr. Long, Dr. Chang, Mr. Nishimaki, Mr. Mizuno, Ms Nishigata, and Mr. Sato.

Program, “Japanese rural areas improved and laid the foundation for the subsequent high economic growth of Japan.” Revisiting the role played by the Rural Life Improvement Program in Japan in the past could provide useful policy lessons for developing countries today, he added.

Another speaker at the opening session was JICA Senior Vice President Hisao Azuma. He said that most of Japan’s agriculture sector consists of small farmers, and developing countries in which the agriculture sector also comprises small farmers could gain much from Japan’s past experience. Mr. Azuma informed the delegates that JICA, as part of its international cooperation program, had compiled Japan’s experiences in rural development for the benefit of other countries.

Professor Norman Long of the Netherlands’ Wageningen University gave the keynote address on “Issues and Perspectives of Rural

Development.” He demonstrated how rural development was socially constructed through the encounters, struggles, and negotiations between the different social actors, such as government agencies, farmers and their families, traders, politicians, and activists. He also introduced key concepts necessary for developing an understanding of the processes of rural development, as well as a methodological overview of his “actor-oriented analysis.”

Japanese resource speakers provided in-depth details on the Rural Life Improvement Program in Japan. One speaker, Mr. Hiroshi Sato of the Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization, outlined the history and achievements of the rural life improvement movement in post-war Japan, and emphasized that although this program was initiated by outside authority, it was quickly localized. Ms Noriko Nishigata, a reporter with the Japan Agricultural

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Ms Pathmajina Siriwardana, a participant from Sri Lanka, sharing her experience with fellow participants.

News, shared her experiences serving as a rural livelihood extension worker in the mid-1960s. The final speaker, Mr. Masami Mizuno of the Policy Research Institute of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, spoke on the role of women in the Rural Life Improvement Program.

The symposium concluded with a panel discussion on “Implications of Rural Life Improvement in Japan for Rural Development in Developing Countries.” Apart from the four resource speakers mentioned above, the other two panelists were Mr. Ryuzo Nishimaki, Managing Director of the Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Development Study Department of JICA, and Dr. Chang Soo Choe, Assistant Professor of Korea University. The panel discussion was chaired by Mr. Kunio Tsubota, Director of the Agriculture Department, APO Secretariat. 🌐