



A·P·O news

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Action research for community development

In 1996, the APO, with financial support from Japan, launched a unique development program called Integrated Community Development (ICD). The objective was to help alleviate poverty through balanced regional development in its member countries. The promotion of self-help development efforts at grassroots level and community-led initiatives in undertaking these efforts were the underlying strategies of the ICD Program. Since its inception, the program has organized symposia on best practices of community development in Asia; training courses on participatory project cycle management; seminars and study meetings on rural life improvement, community-level infrastructure development, and others; and established demonstration projects.



Participants in the working party meeting deliberating on action research modality

After almost a decade of implementing ICD activities, it was felt necessary to review the ICD Program and chart its future direction. On 5–8 April 2004, a Working Party Meeting (WPM) was held in Iran to explore a new modality for community development—action research. Seven delegates from seven member countries took part. In addition, there were three observers from the host country and two resource persons: Dr. Mohammad Hossein Emadi, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Jihad for Agriculture, Iran, and Dr. Leong Yueh Kwong, Director, Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute, Malaysia.

Dr. R.J. Fisher of the University of Sydney's School of Geosciences, Australia, in his paper specially prepared for the WPM, describes action research as "a process in which a group of people with a shared issue of concern collaboratively, systematically, and deliberately plan, implement, and evaluate actions." It combines action and investigation where both occur in parallel. In other words, investigation informs action and the researchers learn useful insights from critical reflection on the action. Another way to look at it is as a cyclical process with repeated cycles of planning, action,

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"Stressing output is the key to improving productivity, while looking to increase activity can result in just the opposite."

Andrew Grove

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evaluation, and re-planning. As a practical example, the WPM studied an action research project implemented in Javadabad County, about 40 km southwest of Tehran. This case study was well received by the participants as the dynamics and consequences were very similar to situations and experiences in most of their home countries. They proffered a number of suggestions for consideration by the Javadabad project.

The WPM also looked into the issue of achieving a multiplier effect for the ICD Program, especially with regard to helping participants take initiatives in implementing lessons gained from APO projects after their return home. In this regard, the following were recommended:

1. Introduce an incentive system, like awards, to recognize outstanding achievements made in undertaking follow-up activities, establishing supportive networks, and making policy suggestions to the government, among others;
2. Support model ICD projects in collaboration with NPOs, government organizations, NGOs, and academia in countries active in community development; and
3. Encourage and strengthen mutual cooperation and sharing of knowledge in ICD activities among member countries, especially the promotion of bilateral study visits. 