

Multicountry Observational Study Mission

on

Revitalizing Rural Economies for More Inclusive Development

14–18 September 2015

Taipei, Republic of China

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

PREAMBLE

The APO in collaboration with the Council of Agriculture (COA) of the Executive Yuan, China Productivity Center, and the National 4-H Club Association organized the Multicountry Observational Study Mission on Revitalizing Rural Economies for More Inclusive Development in Taipei, Republic of China, 14–18 September 2015. Minister Dr. Bao-Ji Chen of the COA of the Executive Yuan opened the program with an inaugural address. APO Secretary-General Mari Amano gave welcome remarks via a video link.

Twenty-four participants from 14 member countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, Republic of China, India, Indonesia, IR Iran, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) and five observers from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, who represented the Asia Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI), attended. Four resource persons from the Republic of China and Germany shared experience in effective strategies, approaches, and successful models of revitalization of rural economies. The study mission also included the visits to and interactive sessions with six local communities that were successfully engaged in rural revitalization, sharing of country case studies, and breakout sessions.

One important outcome of the study mission was the widespread view among the experts and participants that accelerating the revitalization of rural economies is required for maintaining and regenerating local communities, conservation of natural resources and the environment,

sustainable safe food production, protection of natural landscapes, and maintenance of biodiversity. Additionally, the experts believed that the revitalization of rural economies could be one important option to help APO member economies and other Asian countries promote inclusive development.

The participants agreed on the following findings and recommendations for promoting the revitalization of local communities and rural economies in APO member countries:

FINDINGS

1. Setting clear visions and goals together with communities for revitalizing approaches and strategies based on local needs, indigenous knowledge and skills, culture, and available resources while protecting the local environment, culture, heritage, and values is effective.
2. Fostering creativity and sustainability were at the top of the agenda for community development.
3. Each community had a unique regeneration theme to promote hope, happiness, wellbeing, and sustainability, for example: promotion of local culture and heritage; selling local products and local brands; use of local raw materials for making products; organic farming; natural farming; customized marketing strategies; ecotourism; or attracting youth to rural areas and agriculture.
4. Revitalization efforts included the production and promotion of niche products (e.g., organic/eco-friendly rice or tangerines), local consumption (e.g., green bamboo), and effectively addressing local problems (e.g., decline in population, low productivity, fixing embankments, providing basic amenities of life to senior citizens, etc.) through shared values and a common vision for improvement.

5. The communities worked hand in hand with the government's rural regeneration approach in order to set visions and long-term action plans with yearly steps. The government supports communities mostly with pilot projects, capacity building, and enabling market access.
6. The remarkable success of local communities in revitalizing themselves was due largely to the horizontal strategy and bottom-up participatory approach of the Republic of China for rural regeneration.
7. Educated, committed, dedicated, and confident community leadership was able to create a consensus among members of each community to set a vision and a step-by-step revitalization plan.
8. Most community leaders returned to their native communities after quitting urban jobs or retiring. They then developed social entrepreneurship with the communities.
9. Close cooperation between community leaders and the concerned officers with strong government support were successful instruments in executing the revitalization plans.
10. The development of value-added products and promotion of agro-/ecotourism were critical to increase the incomes of community members.
11. Communities' awareness of their strengths and the effective use of available resources in their area were obvious.
12. Participation and integration of young people in activities for the revitalization of local communities is necessary.
13. Value addition to indigenous products was a successful strategy for raising incomes.
14. Rehabilitation and conservation of natural resources (land, water, biodiversity, etc.) and sustainable Green Productivity efforts were an integral part of the process of the revitalization of rural communities.
15. Good connectivity of rural communities with urban areas through sophisticated infrastructure such as roads, railways, and ICT was helping in the revitalization of communities by attracting more tourists and providing easy market access.
16. Creating a community asset inventory ranked according to importance is a meaningful step in the process of revitalizing rural economies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To optimize the use of limited resources, different options for the revitalization of rural economies and communities need to be identified and prioritized. A systematic approach to formulate situation-specific and need-based appropriate revitalization policies should be followed.
2. To promote preservation and rehabilitation of locally available natural resources, policies to compensate communities for the provision of public goods and services are needed.
3. For effective implementation of rural revitalization plans, the integration of policies and programs for the revitalization of rural economies and communities into the general policy framework for rural development, which involves multiple sectors, and close cooperation among key stakeholders are required. These stakeholders are communities, the government, private sector, NGOs, and civil society organizations.
4. To transform the natural potential of local communities into economic opportunities, the diversification of rural economic activities should be promoted. For this purpose, synergies of the rural regeneration program of the Republic of China can be adopted and/or adapted to individual countries' action plans, preserving the strengths and culture of rural communities. Examples are recreational ecoparks, ecotourism, farm/home stays, natural and organic products, or local brands. Such policies and approaches should enable the rural economy to become the engine of sustainable revitalization of the area.
5. There is a need to promote education and awareness of the youth on the importance of local communities in the revitalization of rural economies to achieve inclusive socioeconomic development. For this purpose, member countries may consider emulating the Environmental Education Act of the ROC or similar legislation, which makes it mandatory for the nation's schools, government bodies, businesses, and organizations to attend a certain minimum number of hours per year of government-funded environmental education.
6. It is crucial to build the capacity of local communities to think outside the box and identify and assess strengths and available assets (e.g., capacities of individuals, institutions, and organizations or physical resources). Education, entrepreneurial mindsets, and capacity building are essential components to enable communities to participate actively in the process of local revitalization through creating new opportunities, innovative products and processes, and value-added businesses.

7. Governments should encourage the participation of rural communities in the development of their own local revitalization plans, assist in their formulation, and provide support for implementing rural revitalization initiatives planned through the bottom-up approach.
8. There is a need to promote local brands and products through electronic and print media and e-marketing.
9. There is a need to undertake initiatives to attract youth to agriculture and agribusiness, conserve and rehabilitate natural resources, bridge technology gaps between rural and urban areas, improve physical and social infrastructure, foster entrepreneurship, strengthen farm–market linkages, address land access/rights issues, enhance access to affordable credit, and promote farming systems and rural development resilient to climate change and associated natural disasters.
10. A network of key stakeholders in APO member countries should be established to share best practices of the revitalization of rural economies.
11. Best practices in the revitalization process should be documented in English and shared to allow learning from each other across countries. Such best practices should include, among others, an assessment of the socioeconomic impact of each intervention.
12. The APO should organize more such multicountry programs in different member as well as nonmember countries to learn from successful initiatives undertaken.
13. The APO should provide consultancy in member countries through experts. It should also support follow-up national programs in member countries if they express interest in building the capacity of their key stakeholders for the revitalization of rural areas.

At the end, the participants resolved that they would do their utmost to contribute to accelerated, sustainable revitalization of rural communities and rural economies for promoting inclusive development in their countries by utilizing and disseminating the lessons learned from this study mission.