

Organisation of the Poor

Lessons from Sri Lanka

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*In this classic piece written in the mid-1980s and drawing upon many years of field experience with Sri Lanka's rural and urban poor Sirisena Tilakaratna unfolds **a process of independent mobilisation and organisation of the poor.***

The essay begins by identifying a range of potential self-development actions, which the poor could pursue in their interest. They are grouped into 4 categories- defensive, assertive, constructive and transformative.

This is followed by an examination of a range of community development and service delivery approaches to poverty alleviation and their failure to have any significant impact on the poor.

Critical factors blocking pro-poor development are discussed such as issues of

elite power, modes of living and other dependent-dominant relationships that exist in society.

From this analysis the essay suggests that poverty alleviation programmes must shift away from approaches which work with total communities. It goes on to advocate that the poor need to create their own societal space in which the building of organisations of the poor becomes the critical factor as a means of determining their own actions and, more importantly, of having these structures under their own control and direction.

In the final stages of the essay Tilakaratna outlines the process whereby group formation and support from sensitised (trained) animators/facilitators needs to occur, and the general pattern of this type of work.

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Introduction

Organisation simply means the creation of organs as instruments of action. When groups of people having common interest feel the urge to further those interests they will be stimulated to create their own organs as instruments of action. Organisations of the poor are, accordingly, organs created by the poor who have become conscious of their deprivation and feel the urge to ameliorate their conditions, which means to overcome dehumanising poverty and to enhance their social and economic status.

As atomised and isolated individuals, the poor are too weak, powerless and lack the capacity to take individual initiatives to improve their conditions. They often tend to accept the status quo as their fate. Human creativity lies dormant in people who live in poverty and deprivation. Mainstream development processes could not only by-pass the atomised poor but sometimes harm them by making them victims rather than beneficiaries of development. Organisation is an important means of overcoming such disabilities resulting from atomisation and isolation.

In a broad sense, the purpose of an organisation is to provide a continuing mechanism for the pursuit of the interests of its members as collectively identified by them. Organisation is essentially a means of empowering the poor to enable them to deal with the problems and issues of their poverty.

The organised poor can become active agents of a development process.

Potential Activity of the Organised Poor

The activities of an organisation of the poor can vary substantially depending on the nature of the socio-economic context in which it operates, the specific interests that a particular group seeks to pursue, and the level of consciousness attained by the members of the group concerned. We may summarise the potential activities under 4 categories namely:

- Defensive actions
- Assertive actions
- Constructive actions
- Transformative actions

Defensive actions - are basically aimed at protecting the existing sources, means and conditions of living against erosion or encroachment by actions of other interest groups or the government. They represent collective actions initiated by the poor to prevent a deterioration in their customary mode of living, which may result from a proposed project, policy shift or other external intervention. Examples are dislocations and displacements of people and loss of their traditional means of living as a result of development projects, loss of landing facilities for fishermen as a result of the construction of tourist hotels on a beach, adverse effects of the introduction of industrial trawlers on small fishermen, loss of traditionally cultivated land on account of the operations of an agri-business and health hazards that can result from a project through pollution of the environment. Actions by organised groups can take several forms such as protest campaigns, making representations to relevant authorities, submission of alternative project ideas, negotiations aimed at obtaining relief, and resort to court action.

Assertive actions - refer to assertion by the poor of their economic and social rights available to them under governmental legislation, policies and programmes as well as what they collectively consider to be their legitimate entitlements. Experience shows that governmental legislation intended to benefit the poor (e.g. rights of sharecroppers or tenants) do not automatically reach the poor unless the latter are organised and able to act as a pressure group to assert their entitlements. The same is true of government policies, programmes and projects intended to benefit the poor. The establishment of a service delivery system does not by itself ensure that the intended beneficiaries receive the deliveries. The poor need to organise themselves to make claims, to assert their rights.

An enhancement of the claim making or receiving capacity of the poor is a prerequisite for them to benefit from the governmental deliveries.

Assertive action has a further dimension namely assertion vis-à-vis private vested interests who attempt to make extractions from the poor through a process of unequal or unfair exchange, vis-à-vis exorbitant interest rates charged on credit, supplies or low prices paid for peasant produce and high prices charged for inputs used by the peasant producers.

For example, field investigations reveal that in some villages the peasant producers have to pay as much as 20 percent per month by way of interest for loans they obtain from traders-cum-money lenders which constitutes a substantial drain on peasant incomes. Such credit supplies have become a powerful mechanism of income transfer from the poor to the mercantile interests. Besides the high interest payment, such credit can also carry with it commitments to sell the produce to the creditor (low prices and mal-practices in weighing and grading follow as consequences) and also an obligation to buy the inputs from the same creditor (high prices and low quality inputs follow as consequences). The outcome is a virtual economic bondage, which creates a vicious circle to perpetuate poverty.

In such a context, an important activity of the organised poor will be to initiate action to retrieve the economic surplus they lose as an important means of enhancing their resource base. Collective action to enhance their bargaining power vis-à-vis the mercantile interests or de-link from them and initiate alternative (co-operative) methods of credit and marketing arrangements become important items in an agenda of action aimed at asserting the right to economic surplus.

In this way, organisation enables the poor to achieve a measure of counter power vis-à-vis the power holders (politicians, bureaucracy and private business interests) in society.

Constructive actions - refer to development projects of a self-help nature initiated by groups of poor using primarily their own resources. Instead of waiting for the government to deliver their needs, organised groups could initiate actions to satisfy their group needs for certain services by mobilising their own resources with supplementary assistance from outside. The activities generated through such means can take a variety of forms such as:

- **Infrastructural works** - feeder roads, simple irrigation works, school buildings and similar physical structures
- **Economic projects** - such as consumer goods stores, schemes for collective marketing, cultivation of new crops or animal husbandry, and diversification of economic activity by the setting up of small industries
- **Social development activities** - such as drinking water wells, housing improvements, health and sanitation programmes, pre-schools and community centres, and finally
- **Cultural and other activities** - such as festivals, drama, sports and religious activities

In this way, organisations can serve as an instrument to mobilise people's own resources for projects, which could satisfy a wide variety of people's needs.

Transformative actions - represent innovative and creative initiatives of organised groups of poor with a relatively high level of consciousness. Such groups will attempt to explore and experiment with development styles, which represent alternatives to the mainstream development processes. These may be methods, which are ecologically sustainable and more appropriate to the environment and culture of the people. Organic farming, development and use of biogas and wind power as sources of energy, environmental protection, and indigenous practices of health care are some examples. Evolution of innovative organisational forms and methods of community action, which are democratic and participatory in character and prevention of the growth of elitist forms of leadership within organisations are a further dimension of transformative actions.

The above listing of possible actions clearly show the potential available for the poor to launch a process of self-development through organised initiatives. Organisations enable the poor to mobilise their own resources as well as assert their right to a legitimate share of social resources. The activities of any particular organisation may represent one or more of the above categories, often some combination of the above. For example, assertion of the right to public resources available under various governmental programmes and retrieval of economic surpluses drained away through unequal exchange could provide the viable resource base necessary to launch a programme of transformative activities.

People remain poor not so much because of lack of resources but rather because of the lack of organised strength to get access to resources.

What is missing is not so much resources as the catalytic support for the people to get organised to obtain access to and to use the resources effectively for their benefit.

Having reviewed the potential array of actions that could be initiated by the organised poor, we shall now examine 2 key issues. These are:

- some central factors of relevance to an effort to promote the growth of such organisations; and
- the process through which the poor could be stimulated to organise themselves

Societal Space for Organised Actions by the Poor

By space is meant the extent to which the right of association for the poor is respected and safeguarded by governmental legislation, policies and practices. In other words:

What is the freedom available for the poor to form into independent organisations of their making without the fear of repression?

In regard to the legal space, while the right of association for workers in the organised sector (industry, commerce, public sector and plantations, etc) is available under trade union legislation, the workers in the rural sector and urban informal sector who are mostly self-employed or irregularly employed do not come within the preview of such labour legislation. The majority of the poor being either self-employed (farmers, fishers, artisans, vendors, etc) or casual wage earners without regular employment (without a permanent employer), the trade union legislation (with its emphasis on employer-employee relations) has little or no relevance to them.

Currently, the most important method available for the poor to organise and enjoy legal status is to form co-operatives under Co-operative Law. However, the co-operative movement (with the possible exception of the thrift and credit co-operative societies) has in general failed to provide an effective organisational mechanism for the poor. The reasons for this situation are fairly well known and need not be explored here. At present most of the organised groups of the poor in the country operate informally - they lack legal status. They have not opted to become formal co-operative societies partly for fear of bureaucratic interference and control and partly because of the poor image that people have of the co-operative societies in general.

Hence one positive action that the government can take is the enactment of supportive legislation to facilitate the organisation of the poor and to give such organisations legal status. In regard to rural workers, the International Labour Organisation's ILO Rural Workers Organisation Convention and Recommendation (No 141 and 145 of 1975) provide the rationale and guidelines for the enactment of the necessary legislation. In this Convention, the term rural worker has been defined *to include any person engaged in agriculture, handicrafts or related occupation in a rural area whether as a wage earner or as a self-employed person such as a tenant, sharecropper or small owner-occupier provided that they work the land themselves with the help of their family labour or with the help of occasional outside labour.* The Philippines for example has ratified this Convention and has enacted legislation to implement it. The Rural Workers Bureau set up under this legislation actively assists in the organisation of the rural workers. Registration with the Bureau provides the legal status to an organisation of the rural poor.

Besides legislation, government policies and practices are a key determinant of the space available for the poor to form independent organisations of their own. The main issue here is whether there is a political will to permit free association for the poor. Organisation of the poor results in a diffusion of power. Organised people operate as pressure groups on the political and administrative system. The politicians may not be willing to see an erosion in their power base. They may prefer to deal with the poor through their local political agents or through community organisations having elite leadership. They may not wish to encourage organisations which are independent and over which they lack control. It is however difficult to generalise on this matter. Field level experiences vary - while some local level political actors have proved willing to allow the poor to take organised initiatives to improve their socio-economic status, others have preferred a more paternalistic approach.

A conducive framework and an environment for the organisation of the poor can be created only if there is a political will and commitment at the highest levels.

Community Organisation versus Organisations of the Poor

An important issue that a poverty alleviation approach has to consider is whether the membership of an organisation should be universal (embracing all sections of a community) or whether it should be confined to the poor only. On this point, it is important to recognise that communities whether urban or rural, are not in general homogeneous socio-economic entities. They are differentiated structures having basic contradictions and socio-economic divisions within them. The most conspicuous division being that between the rich elite (a powerful minority) and the poor/deprived (a weak majority). Those in the middle usually tend to identify themselves with one or the other group implicitly or explicitly. It is also sometimes the case that the poor depend on the rich for their living through relations such as sharecropping, tenancy, credit arrangements, etc thereby creating a kind of dominant-dependent asymmetrical socio-economic relation within the community. Such a situation creates a diversity of interests within a community, which are sometimes conflicting in nature.

Social reality at the community level is unlikely to be a harmonious set of interests.

Individual perceptions of basic problems of a community can vary from a lack of electricity for one group to low product prices and lack of basic inputs for another. Field studies carried out on the perceptions of people at different socio-economic levels living in the same community/village have revealed considerable diversities and contradictions. In such a context a community organisation having universal membership cannot be an effective means of focussing sharply on the problems of the poor. Experience in many countries has revealed that organisations which draw their membership from all sections of the community irrespective of the socio-economic disparities tend to be dominated by the minority of elite interests who will turn the activities of the organisations in their own favour.

What is theoretically a neutral organisation tends to become in practice a biased one in favour of the dominant (elitist) interests.

The poor tend to become silent spectators or observers rather than active participants in such organisations. This is one of the important factors in the limited success that many of the community organisations such as Rural Development Societies and Gramodya Mandalas have exhibited in coming to grips with the problems of the poor.

The record of achievements of most community organisations is largely in the handling of common issues of a non-controversial type such as social welfare, religious activities or physical infrastructure (such as feeder roads, water supplies, etc), which do not disturb the existing socio-economic relations within the community rather than in the direct contribution they have made to the reduction of poverty.

Experience suggests that a poverty alleviation programme must shift away from approaches, which work with total communities. The attempt should be rather to separate out the poor for an independent process of mobilisation and organisation. Given the reality of power relations and conflicting interests within a community, a community organisation (as distinct from an organisation of the poor) cannot provide an instrument for the poor to initiate actions to improve their socio-economic status.

It should however be noted that the poor themselves are not a homogeneous category. There are many diversities among them based on asset ownership, means of living and a host of other factors. Such differences are particularly sharp in the economic sphere that is in the sources and means of livelihood. Organising the poor must therefore begin with an attempt to identify the various categories of the poor in a given locality - that is categories of households placed in more or less similar socio-economic situations, suffering from more or less similar disabilities and hence likely to have a common interest to pursue. While recognising the diversity among the poor, it is also important to recognise that some of their problems are common to most if not all. Such common interests are most likely to be found in the

social sphere, that is housing, health and sanitation, education and also in infrastructural needs. Given this situation, the organisational structure must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate both these features, namely the diversity of some interests (particularly in the economic sphere) and the commonality of others (particularly in the social sphere).

Case studies of organisational form evolved by the poor in different socio-economic contexts reveal that organisations have operated best when they are rooted in small grassroots groups (as the base) which have as members persons with more or less similar economic interests and linked together to be able to operate as larger entities (a federation/association/forum) where necessary. The small groups at the base (generally not more than about 20 to 25 member households) are the operational entities dealing directly with matters relating to economic matters (savings, credit, production, employment, etc) while the inter-group federations will deal with certain problems and issues common to all groups, which may be a larger issue, which no individual group can handle or simply co-ordination of activity.

The Process of Group Formation

The emergence of organisations and the nature and scope of the activities they would initiate are critically dependent on the awareness and consciousness of the poor concerned. Organisations rarely emerge spontaneously. The poor will feel the urge to organise themselves when they are stimulated through a process of awareness build-up. While there is no single or unique method to stimulate the poor to organise themselves, the main elements in the general pattern that has emerged from field practices may be summarised into the following 6 stages:

- Catalytic Intervention
- Mobilisation and Awareness Build-up
- Organisation for Development Actions
- Creation of a Development Process
- Multiplication and Inter Group Actions
- Creation of a Cadre of Catalytic Skills

Catalytic Intervention

Intervention in a community by sensitised (trained) catalyst/animator/facilitators has often been the first step. Such a catalyst could emerge from within the community itself or enter from outside. She/he possesses certain social skills - in particular an ability to interact with people in an equal (non-dominant) relationship, sensitivity to people's perceptions and an ability to stimulate the people to investigate and reflect on their problems. Potential persons for this purpose could be identified from within communities, governmental systems or from non-governmental sources. They need to be sensitised through a process of participatory training. The methodology for this is now well documented. Intervention begins by an attempt to understand the social structure of the community concerned for the purpose of identifying the target groups that is groups suffering from deprivations of one kind or another, e.g. assetless poor, marginal farmers, small farmers, artisans, casual workers, etc.

Conventional modes of intervention for community development explicitly or implicitly treat people as objects of change and the relation between the intervenor (development worker) and the people often takes the form of a **knowing subject acting upon an unknowing object**. Since it is assumed that people have no knowledge base or that their knowledge is irrelevant or unscientific, people have to be told and instructed what they should do. The outcome is a delivery approach - an attempt to bring development to people through deliveries of pre-packaged knowledge and resources from outside.

Fundamental to the initiation of a process of participatory development (based on the organised initiatives of the poor) is the break up of this dichotomy of subject and object and the transformation of this relation into one between **two knowing subjects** - an interaction between two knowledge streams namely that of the people and that brought in by the intervenor, one experiential and the other formal.

The notion of subject-to-subject interaction summarises the essences of a process of catalytic intervention.

Mobilisation and Awareness Build-up

Having identified the target households, the catalyst will interact with them and mobilise them to investigate the nature of and factors in their poverty. This is a step by step process in which the catalyst will assist the identified poor to understand the socio-economic reality in which they live by raising questions and issues, stimulating the people to reflect on their life situations, gather the necessary information and data and to analyse the data to derive conclusions on the factors causing poverty and deprivation.

This is a process of self-inquiry and reflection by the poor on their life situations. It will enable them to move from a sensory perception of their problems to some sort of scientific or articulated analysis and understanding of their problems. The reality that people experience (poverty) is problematised for people to critically reflect upon - this helps to raise the awareness of the people.

Organisation for Development Actions

The process of inquiry and investigation that the poor initiate (assisted by the catalyst) by raising their awareness about their problems, will also motivate them to explore possibilities of changing the micro reality in which they live - that is to overcome problems and disabilities they have identified.

It will become increasingly clear that it is through an organised effort that changes could be brought about - as atomised individuals they are too weak to bring about any changes. Hence the emergence of organised groups of poor (subject to more or less common problems, hence having a common interests) follows as a logical step from awareness creation and exploration of possibilities for changing their conditions.

Organised initiatives often start with small scale actions that people feel confident to undertake - building up of group funds and the use of such funds to start a project or an activity which yields some income are some commonly observed initial activities. With the success achieved in the first few initiatives, the groups begin to develop confidence in their ability to undertake further actions and the process will feed on itself.

Creation of a Development Process

After each development action, the groups will reflect on the experience, analyse the consequences, assess the benefits accrued, explore possibilities for further development actions and will plan the next step. This process of back-and-forth (of action-reflection and back to further action) creates a dynamism to sustain and expand the development process. The groups will after a point improve their access to resources available from within the social system through enhanced bargaining power and assertion of their rights. The groups will supplement their resources through access to bank credit, extension services and other governmental deliveries. Catalytic skills (leaders) will emerge from within the organised groups who will now begin to play a leading role in the initiation of new activities and who will also eventually replace the catalyst who came from the outside. The process will then be fully internalised by the organised groups.

Multiplication and Inter Group Actions

Multiplication of the development actions from one group of poor to another, from one community/village to another also tend to follow (at least to some limited extent) as an organic development. For one thing, a demonstration effect is created on the possibility of life improvement through organised efforts. For another, the internal catalysts (thrown up from within the organised groups) carry the message to other communities and undertake conscious multiplication efforts. Outside catalysts need to assist this process of multiplication in order to speed up its momentum.

When a number of organised groups emerge in a given locality, they tend to interact with each other, forge links and to initiate inter-group actions to tackle larger issues and problems, which no single group could tackle with its resources. The process will now shift to a higher plain, the formation of a federation of small grassroots groups, which could open up new opportunities to acquire resources and to undertake new initiatives.

Creation of a Cadre of Catalytic Skills

A process as summarised above rarely unfolds without some catalytic support from outside. Hence the need for a sensitised (trained) cadre of catalytic skills. The role of a catalyst is a dual one namely:

- **Animation** - that is assistance to the poor to raise their awareness on their problems, in particular the causal factors in their poverty which lie within their control; and
- **Facilitation** - that is assistance to the poor to overcome practical barriers to development actions, which may include such matters as consultancy for project preparation, assistance to develop links with government agencies and training in skills.

These are tasks that have to be carried out by persons having certain qualities and skills such as:

- a sense of commitment to the poor (a willingness to work with the poor and derive satisfaction from a faith in the capacity of the people to take initiatives);
- social and behavioural skills such as a willingness to learn from experiences;
- two-way (horizontal) communication skills; and
- non-dominant style of operation when working with people.

Persons with such potential need to be carefully selected and put through a process of participatory training in order to develop their skills at animation and facilitation. After an initial orientation, it is basically through exposure to the field situations, critical reflections on their field experiences and sharing and analysing these experiences with fellow workers that a catalyst learns and improves his or her skills.

Learning to stimulate poor people into organised actions is an art that has to be cultivated through practice rather than through formal training and mechanical guidelines.