

SELF-RELIANCE AND PARTICIPATION OF THE POOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN THE THIRD WORLD

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A self-reliant approach to Third World economic development provides a new orientation in development strategy. Its central emphasis is on meeting the basic needs of the poor and in encouraging them to participate in the development process. The author argues that this participative process is not only the answer to Third World problems but also a global necessity.

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IN THE Third World, successful economic development and equitable growth now require some emphasis on self-reliance which, both conceptually and by definition, implies a participatory role in the process by the beneficiaries, at least for the provision of their basic needs. This article presumes that participation of the poor refers to the active and willing participation of Third World peoples in the development of the nation-state in which they reside. Such participation requires that these people not only share in the distribution of the benefits of development, be they the material benefits of increased output or other benefits considered enhancing to the quality of life, but that they share also in the task of creating these benefits.¹ As such, it is the premise of this article that such participation is a *sine qua non* to any successful development strategy emphasizing self-reliance.

Framework of self-reliance

Self-reliance is taken here to mean autonomy of decision-making and full mobilization of a society's own resources under its own initiative and direction. It also means rejection of the principle of exploitative appropriation of others'

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resources. A strategy of development emphasizing self-reliance focuses on increasing cooperative relations in and among Third World nations and reducing their individual and collective dependence on the developed nations. Its emphasis is on selective coordination of economic activities for maximizing the provision of basic needs. Additionally, there is the concept of collective self-reliance which is a necessary extension of national self-reliance for almost all Third World nations, both in terms of creating interdependent relationships with similar economies and of improving the terms of economic exchange with the developed nations. However, it cannot be a substitute for national strategies for self-reliance.²

The kind of new internal economic order needed to ensure that development is beneficial to the majority of the poor, rather than the elites, of the Third World nations is one based on principles of self-reliant development. Bread and justice are most fully realized in societies committed to self-reliance. Thus, self-reliant development rejects concentrating national resources on the rich in the hope that something might trickle down. Instead self-reliant development concentrates directly on those at the bottom (the poor) and their basic needs. It is a model of development that emphasizes meeting the basic human needs of the masses of poor people in a given country through strategies geared to the particular human and natural resources, values, and traditions of that country, and through strategies maximizing the collective efforts of people within each country and among Third World countries.

The operational framework of self-reliance focuses, therefore, on four elements. The first element pertains to basic human needs; which means attacking poverty directly and not through the trickle-down process. In other words, it means giving priority to the provision of food, shelter, housing, education, health care, and jobs, at the least. The second element relates to maximization of the use of local resources and values through the educational system as appropriate to the needs, resources, and values of the people. It entails, therefore, the development of individuals as well as nations. Education should be used to meet the basic needs of individuals to receive a foundation of knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills on which to build a later life for the benefit of themselves and society. This element of self-reliance can be regarded as creative self-reliance. It is not self-reliance in the sense of cutting off links completely from the world but self-reliance in the sense of being self-confident as nations to base development on their own cultural values, on its own thinking and on its own value system without being defensive or apologetic.³

The third element in the framework of self-reliance, and the one on which this article concentrates, deals with participation of the poor masses in the development process. This participation implies activity in planning and programme implementation by the poor for accelerated development.⁴ The fourth and final element in the framework of self-reliance pertains to the issue of interdependence or collective self-reliance, ie, technical cooperation among Third World nations for their individual as well as collective development. Undoubtedly, collective self-reliance and growing cooperation among developing nations will further strengthen their role in the world economy.⁵ Cooperation among these countries is aimed at generating or adapting knowledge needed for a socially relevant endogenous self-sustained develop-

ment process in order to avoid the blind or forced transfer of inadequate technology. Moreover, the expansion of the capacity of Third World nations to generate and adapt knowledge through a cooperative effort can contribute towards a more equitable world order where choices are greater, solutions are better adapted to the specific historical circumstances of different countries, and dependence is decreased.

Furthermore, cooperation among Third World nations can also contribute to a filling of the vacuum of regional and inter-regional links among such nations. This vacuum is the result of the historical colonial heritage of exclusive links which were later maintained through a world order that has not allowed the emergence of alternative patterns to the traditional centre-periphery ones more suitable for Third World nations. The collective self-reliance approach to development, therefore, implies, a delinking from those components of the international system in which a balanced relationship cannot be established, and a relinking among Third World nations with whom a balanced relationship may be attained.

This puts the issue of self-reliance in operational perspective. Primary emphasis is placed by the Third World nations on genuine cooperation which is regarded as an egalitarian form of partnership in which nationally-based effort and the benefits of a joint undertaking in the short- and long-term are shared evenly among participating nations; where parties have equal influence irrespective of their relative economic, political or military strengths and where efforts and benefits are shared in accordance with their abilities and needs. It is, above all, a 'solidarity contract' to contribute to the fulfillment of each party's legitimate aspirations, and to unite against forces opposing these aspirations and seeking to increase dependency.

The emphasis of a strategy of self-reliant development is that economic activity should be geared to the satisfaction of the basic needs of the poor masses. Moreover, the Third World nations and their poor masses are the best arbiters of their own basic needs and the order of priority in which these needs should be satisfied. Collectively, the interests of the various Third World nations are balanced against each other so as to make it profitable for each country to accept the deal as a whole.

Self-reliance—a new orientation

A self-reliant approach to economic development, with central emphasis on meeting the basic needs of the poor of the Third World nations, provides a new orientation in development strategy. It implies an unprecedented expansion in the production of foodstuffs and of simple manufactured goods, using technology appropriate to the resource endowments of the developing nations themselves. Since the pattern of basic needs in Third World nations is quite different from the pattern of import demand by developed nations, the adoption of a self-reliant basic needs strategy of development would mean the emergence of a new pattern of industrialization in the Third World.

The idea of accelerated economic development through self-reliance or collective self-reliance is not a new one. Until recently, however, the concept found expression in the integration schemes of a regional or sub-regional

character which currently embrace about one-half of the total number of Third World nations. However, the whole theory of self-reliance hinges on one fundamental hypothesis: that, together, resources constitute a reservoir, hitherto partly drained, partly misdirected, and largely underutilized, that is sufficient for the satisfaction of basic human material needs all over the world. It is a complex strategy—needing both built-in dynamism and firm institutional foundations—calculated to generate and implement clusters of collective schemes. It gives the Third World an identity, not as the Third World, but as one of three economic worlds; to lift the poor countries together from passivity to participation and to give each greater economic manoeuvrability. In short, self-reliance not only offers scope for national development and bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the North, but endless opportunity for innovation, for exploring areas in employment, job satisfaction and human relations generally, which have not been charted before and which are probably beyond the reach of the economically established North.

The participatory imperative of the poor

As mentioned above, the relationship between a successful self-reliance strategy and participation of the poor is an essential one. There is an implied interdependence between these two concepts. Moreover, some authors have included ‘optimum participation among development’s strategic principles, because unless efforts are made to widen participation, development will interfere with men’s quest for esteem and freedom from manipulation’.⁸ Other authors have argued that ‘on balance, socio-economic development creates conditions favouring higher levels of participation’.⁹ It is apparent that although there are different ways to view participation, the dominant perspective in the literature is to treat it pragmatically, that is, to view it as a strategy to improve the development process.¹⁰

Development is seen as achievable by people able and willing to take advantage of opportunities to participate in the nation–state economy. It is the participation of the masses which shapes the development process and substantively defines development of the nation. The development strategy chosen, such as self-reliance, represents the mode through which participation impacts upon the development process.

It can safely be assumed, from currently available evidence, that if participatory processes exist, the masses will want to get involved as long as they benefit from the process. Self-reliant development strategies facilitate participation and thus result in a better ‘fit’ between what beneficiaries want and what the programmes provide. Participation thus facilitates implementation because the motivation to build and exploit the benefits are stronger when the participants have agreed upon the course of action,¹¹ as was the case at the inception of the Cooperative Socialist Movement in Guyana.

That higher levels of participation of the poor should and do have positive effects on socio-economic equality in the Third World is a foregone conclusion. More generally, widespread participation generally means more widespread access to power, and those who gain access to power will insist that there be actions to broaden their share in the economic benefits of society. In Jamaica,

for example, participation of the poor in local organizations is closely tied to the benefits that members derive therefrom.¹² And, in China, where the Socialist Revolution was based on a large-scale participation of the peasants in a revolutionary struggle, economic cooperation in agriculture and side-line production were combined with the lowest level of government administration and the principles of collective ownership and use of land to considerably strengthen the autonomous power of these local units of rural administration.¹³

Hence, participation of the poor is not only a way to improve programme performance but also a goal in itself. Some argue that such participation should be encouraged because it is essential to self-reliance, since all development activities must mobilize people's active participation so that they may be able to stand on their own feet.¹⁴

Encouraging such participation in the Third World should be given priority to enhance successful development; this may be achieved in many ways thus forming an incentive basis for continued participation. Following is a consideration of some of the primary factors necessary to encourage mass participation of the poor in the Third World development process.

Several studies have shown that programme outcomes are much more successful where there is active participation at the local level.¹⁵ To enhance such participation the masses must be able to identify and obtain clear benefits. These benefits must be from the point of view of the beneficiaries and not of the bureaucrats. Although self-reliance projects by their very nature command high levels of participation, it may be simplistic to expect the poor to band together merely because a project desires local input or lends itself to cooperative action. And, although there are some studies which suggest that participation of the poor combines an element of manipulation by others with some degree of independent choice and judgment,¹⁶ the overwhelming evidence suggests that the impetus to participate is primarily identified with the notion of initiative;¹⁷ that is, initiative shared and prompted by mutually reinforcing impetuses, as was the case, for example, in Jamaica's second Integrated Rural Development Project and the Dharampur block level development planning project in India.¹⁸

Such initiative, however, will need to be sustained over time to ensure successful outcomes over the long term. One method of achieving this would be to channel projects and subject them to control and direction at the local level. Though collective participation among the poor in the Third World may take different forms because of ethnic divisions, varied neighborhoods and some special interests, the single most common characteristic in participation is the desire for local autonomy. Autonomy is desired for many reasons but primarily because of a distrust of bureaucrats and a need to safeguard future benefits. The higher the level of autonomy the higher the level of participation among the poor is likely to be. Such is the case, for example, in the village setting in Tanzania.

The necessity for autonomy in the participatory process relates to that critical factor control. Control, in turn, dictates the degree of power the poor will have to make their participation effective. There are clearly differences in degrees of power and these will have some impact on the outcomes of participation and for the satisfaction the poor can derive from it. However, authentic

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participation usually requires a redistribution of power. Poor people know what they require to satisfy their interests, meet their needs, and solve their problems. Projects tend to work best when the intended beneficiaries are listened to and their ideas respected, and, indeed, when the projects are controlled and managed by the beneficiaries themselves. The participants do not necessarily have to share power equally or take part in every decision but their views must be secured and represented by their leadership.

This raises the issue of a strong and committed leadership to represent effectively the interests of the poor. It must be recognized also that dependency on a single charismatic leader will result in failure of the participatory process. Ideally, leadership involves some sharing of power or influence while at the same time participation by the poor requires leaders with some idea of how to exert influence. This is necessary to maintain control and prevent red tape and bureaucratic end-runs which may dilute the participatory process of the poor.

Also of importance is the need for recognition of the importance of community bases. Individual community grass root organizations greatly enhance the opportunities of poor people to improve their own lives. By organizing, working together, and sharing scarce resources, poor people can find new employment opportunities, raise their incomes, and bring vital services to their communities. There are large and growing numbers of peasant and community organizations in such countries as Haiti, Paraguay, and Peru through which poor people are striving to improve their situations. Their endurance in the face of great odds suggests the importance of these organizations to their communities.¹⁹

The case for community participation in the development process is now well recognized. Such participation requires identification with the movement, which grows only out of involvement in thinking, planning, deciding, acting and evaluating, focused on one purpose, namely socio-economic development, that leads to self-reliance. But, despite the recent proliferation of the participatory process in the development thrust and the attendant research that it has given rise to, there are still a number of obstacles to participation of the poor in the Third World.

The obstacles faced are varied and are found within the implementing agencies, within the communities themselves, and also within the broader institutions of the society.²⁰ Within the implementing agencies the primary problem is their centralized nature which does not lend itself to participation in decision-making by others. Moreover, these agencies tend to be located some distance away, in national or regional capitals, which keeps them out of touch with the communities they are intended to serve. In the communities themselves, the major problems are a lack of appropriate local organization, and corruption on the part of the more powerful community individuals who take personal advantage of any latitude for influence available, thus corrupting the purpose of the participatory approach and destroying the spirit of cooperative effort.²¹ Within the broader society, the basic problem is that participation is generally pursued as a way of reaching the poorer elements of a society to increase their welfare. However, this involves a societal change process which tends to conflict with the *status quo*,²² as is the case with the land reform programmes in Latin America.

Conclusions

The concept of self-reliance has achieved prominence in the current development debate. Its primary emphasis is that economic activity should be tailored to the basic needs of the poor. Moreover, it is also now recognized that Third World nations must conceive self-reliance not in terms of national or social isolation, but in balanced forms of association with other national and social units, thus making it a collective self-reliant effort through participatory approaches.²³

Participatory approaches seem to be the only ones that hold out long-term hope for effective development.²⁴ Effective development means sensitivity to the problems a community feels it must resolve, and a level of complexity and scope which can be understood and hence controlled and sustained by the population. Communities that are treated as objects by the development systems around them, manipulated and always told what to do, will never learn self-reliance.²⁵

Of all the new values to be created, self-reliance is the single most important. The Third World has depended too long on external masters. However, it must be recognized that self-reliance does not necessarily guarantee self-sufficiency, but it does serve as the antithesis of dependence. As conceived, self-reliance functions through the active participation of the people and, through this process, community needs are defined and fostered. Thus mass participation becomes the alpha and omega of self-reliance, as necessary and, often, sufficient conditions.²⁶

A number of Third World governments have adopted the principle of popular or mass participation of the poor as an explicit and central feature of policy, expressed in new institutions, programmes, laws and public ideology. Such efforts need to be intensified and further encouraged both through individual government efforts and the international development agencies.

Notes and references

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