

Poverty alleviation

Dignity, ecological growth or just money?

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While everybody is talking about a “green economy”, what we seem to be missing is a critique of the very concept. However hard the term has tried to appear different, it still makes many people feel uncomfortable. How can we ensure that the new “green economy” is not just a new “greed economy”?

Year: 2009; venue: Copenhagen. The Climate Summit is going on. A distinguished speaker invited by the United Nations to address the plenary is Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Governor of the North American state of California. Many of the participants (including myself) got a bit confused when he started speaking about his contribution to mitigating global warming, and he mentioned that (a) he has started heating his Olympic sized swimming pool with solar power instead of electric power, and (b) he converted his fleet of SUVs into “hybrids”. Perhaps even more surprising was that the entire Assembly got up to give him a standing ovation.

Apart from the ridiculousness of inviting Mr Schwarzenegger to address the plenary, when no farmer or indigenous person was invited as speaker, worse was the fact that no-one ever thought of questioning why must a family of two use an enormous swimming pool and use so much of energy (renewable or otherwise) for heating its 2,500,000 litres of water. No-one questioned why he must drive a fleet [of half a dozen or more] of cars... It is this interpretation of what is “green and good” that baffles those who work with people who cannot even afford a bus fare, let alone a stable of cars. And to my mind the contribution they make to mitigate climate change and cool our planet, or to feed it, is far larger. It is the same apprehension I carry when the idea of a “green economy” is discussed, and which becomes especially relevant when thinking of the millions of persons who live in very difficult conditions - and when we think that economists are supposed to help them overcome poverty.

Definitions

But how do we define poverty? I remember the schoolboy who, when asked to write about poverty, mentioned that “*I am poor, so I know about it. My driver is also poor. My cook is even poorer. My gardener is also poor.*” If the idea of a “green economy” is



Nagwar Bhoomamma in a korra field

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linked to the poverty of millions of persons, will we be forced to live with another farce such as that of Mr Schwarzenegger? Much of the definitions of poverty have a monetised interpretation to it. A typical example is that of the Indian Planning Commission, which put the poverty threshold at Rs. 27 per capita. This kind of calculation is always done on the basis of one’s contribution to the national GDP. But the GDP is in itself another hoax. As Devinder Sharma says, *if a tree is standing, it does not contribute to GDP. But the moment it is cut and made into tradable timber, it adds to GDP.*

So what contributes, and to what? In another UN conference, this time focusing on the concept of Gross National Happiness, the

former Prime Minister of Bhutan, Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley, said that “We have to think of human well-being in broader terms. Material well-being is only one component. That doesn’t ensure that you’re at peace with your environment and in harmony with each other... The GDP-led development model that compels boundless growth on a planet with limited resources no longer makes economic sense. It is the cause of our irresponsible, immoral and self-destructive actions.” Thinley added that “The purpose of development must be to create enabling conditions through public policy for the pursuit of the ultimate goal of happiness by all citizens.”

“GNP (the Gross National Product) by itself does not promote happiness,” said Jeffery Sachs, a prominent development economist at Columbia University in New York, and also author of the World Happiness Report. “The U.S. has had a three time increase of GNP per capita since 1960, but the happiness needle hasn’t budged. Other countries have pursued other policies and achieved much greater gains of happiness, even at much lower levels of per capita income.” In other words, we should not let the new concept of a “green economy” just be the “business-as-usual” way.

A view from DDS

The Deccan Development Society, a grassroots organisation with which I am associated with for the last 25 years, works in the Medak district of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, right at the centre of semi-arid India. DDS works with about 5,000 very

small-scale women farmers who primarily belong to the socially excluded groups. These are people who suffer multiple marginalisation. In an urban-rural divide, as rural people, they are marginalised. Being poor, in an economic divide they are marginalised. Being *dalits*, in a social divide they are marginalised. And as women they face severe marginalisation in a gender divide. Working with this group has been a challenge.

A quarter of a century ago, our initial aim was simply put as “poverty alleviation”. But as we started listening and looking carefully at the people we were working with, our own idea of what constitutes poverty changed. In this line of transformation, today we look at poverty from a much broader perspective, moving away from monetary perspective towards a sovereignty perspective; from a “rights” perspective to an “autonomy” perspective. This has led us towards autonomous and community-controlled food production systems; autonomous healthcare systems; autonomous markets; and an autonomous media.

How are these initiatives related to poverty? That is where I would like to revert back to the definition of poverty. In a rural area, if a woman from a *dalit* community is able to take care of her food needs and of her health needs in a satisfactory manner, and if she is able to be a member of an autonomous market set up by her group, and if she is able to air her views in the public space through the community radio station, and make her own films through initiatives like the Community Video Collective, should she be

Sangham members participating in a meeting



Sowing organic seeds

Sabyasachi Roy

There is a growing realisation that only the adoption of ecological and sustainable farming practices can reverse the declining trend in farm productivity in the state of West Bengal, India. A small farm of 3.8 acres run by Birendra Kumar Roy and Paromita Sarkar Roy in the village of Kamalakantapur, near Santiniketan, in West Bengal state, shows that excessive use of chemical inputs and land degradation is not the only option. Their SAKRIA (meaning “active” in Bengali) organic farm sustains the needs of the family, is profitable, and allows their child to grow up in an environment free of pollution, chemicals and pesticides.

The farm grows a variety of seasonal crops and vegetables, with special focus on traditional varieties, appropriate to the conditions and the climatic situation. The different varieties of organic fruits grown on the farm ensure proper nutrition, providing the necessary vitamins and tasty food to the family. A variety of fishes are grown in the farm pond, completing the family’s nutritional requirements. Perennial trees are used as natural barriers against extreme weather conditions. Farm yard manure and mulched leaves are used to fertilise the soil. Leguminous pulse crops are intercropped in the orchards and grown on a rotational basis, ensuring soil nitrogen fixation and also green manuring. No chemical pesticides are used. The manual removal of weed goes hand in hand with the use of organic pesticide solutions and strategic intercropping (even they face the serious problem of pests drifting onto their farm from other farm lands).

After meeting all the nutritional requirements of the family, the excess paddy, oilseeds, vegetables and pulses are either used for the preparation of value-added products or sold to

small retailers and families in the vicinity. This source of income allows the family to employ four fulltime labourers and eight to ten seasonal labourers.

The farmers’ consistent extension efforts in the last fifteen years have led to many neighbouring farmers cultivating more varieties of crops and intercropping them with legumes. The soil condition in the area surrounding the farm has improved. The population of earthworms has substantially increased on SAKRIA farm, resulting in soils with a higher water holding capacity. The variety and diversity of plants and trees has also resulted in noticeable changes in area’s wildlife.

The SAKRIA organic farm may be a small family farm in a remote dry land area of West Bengal, but it demonstrates what can be achieved through love for the land and nature, self-determination, innovation and hard work. The success lies in the fact that the farmers have neatly interwoven their traditional knowledge with “modern” techniques. The main constraint they face is that customers are not ready to pay extra for their organic products, especially since organic certification services are lacking in the area. Most farmers feel that organic certification processes are complex and expensive. There is thus a need to enhance facilities and the availability of services for organic certification, and facilitate small-scale farmers so that they better market their products. If the farmers could also achieve higher prices for their produce, the benefits seen in SAKRIA would be even greater.

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called a woman in poverty just because her monetary income is less than the classical US\$ 2 per day? On the contrary if she earns US\$ 3 per day but depends completely on an external market for her food, nutrition or healthcare, and has no media space to air her views and opinions, would that woman be considered having escaped poverty?

It is this analysis which makes me say that the small-scale farmers with whom we work have escaped poverty. In terms of food production and consumption, these are small-scale farmers with an average holding of about 2 acres. In this holding they have adopted biodiverse farming systems and are able to produce all the cereals, legumes and oilseeds they want for an entire year’s consumption. Nowadays,

- The per capita consumption of an average DDS family stands at 500 g of cereals and 50 grams of pulses. According to the latest Economic Survey of India, these families are eating

20% more cereals and nearly 40% more of pulses than the rest of India;

- In terms of money spent, nearly 85% of these households spend less than Rs.100 per person per month on food (compared to Rs.400 spent per capita by rural households in the state of Andhra Pradesh), since most of them are producing their own food. Thus, for every household of five, DDS families are saving [earning?] Rs.1500. They also sell nearly 70% of the pulses produced on their farms and 60% of the fodder, earning an additional income;
- All DDS communities have established their own Public Distribution System. They grow nutritious millets which are culturally and agro-ecologically adapted to the local conditions. Through this system, they not only take care of small and marginal farming families, but also of the landless people in their communities. A few years ago, they did a

hunger mapping of their villages and found out who were the less fortunate among them, and started community food kitchens for them. From food receivers, they became food providers.

It can also be said that agriculture does not rely on expensive fertilizers and pesticides. They use farmyard manure, biofertilisers produced at the household level and other family-made botanical formulations for plant care and plant growth. All seeds are their own, saved year after year. Having no expenses at all in terms of seeds, fertilisers and pesticides, they save an average of Rs. 2,000 per acre per season. They use no external energy, produce no greenhouse gases, and keep a clean energy balance sheet.

In terms of their healthcare systems, each community has their own health worker, who is mostly a volunteer. This person normally cures all minor illnesses in her community; and anyone can approach her. She charges nothing for the services she offers. She makes only herbal medicines. In the last decade, DDS health workers have saved their community of 50 villages, up to Rs. 7.5 million every year. In addition, communities have raised 29 medicinal commons, with each commons having more than 50 plant species, each of which has a medicinal quality. Anyone in the community can access these commons and the plants to make their own formulations. No money is charged for them.

Regarding their market options, DDS communities run their own market, the *Market of the Walkouts*. This is a co-operative market headed by a committee of 11 women. It makes all decisions democratically, including those regarding the prices paid to the farmers who supply produce to them. Every member of this market is privileged to receive 10% more than the external market rate for every produce she sells to her market. She also gets a 10% discount for all things she purchases. Every year, the co-operative even distributes dividends!

Nearly 80% of the DDS women are engaged in some form of “eco-enterprise”, at the heart of which are the animals they raise. Each family has a goat or a buffalo, a bullock and at least half a dozen poultry (or a combination of all these). Their earning through milk and meat averages close to Rs. 2,500 per month. In addition, cattle are also a great source of manure. Most families produce biofertilisers (an average of 1.5 tonnes per year, sold at nearly Rs. 6 per kg). The cattle produce nearly 6 tonnes of farmyard manure: a saving of up to Rs. 1500 per year. Finally, we can also say that, since 1990, DDS communities have planted over a million trees in about 35 locations raising neighbourhood forests (or “community commons”). These forests have more than 80 plant species in each, from which families get fodder, fruits, fuelwood and timber.

A valid alternative

I am mentioning all these factors in order to underline the fact that DDS has chosen to go beyond the classical “income generation” model, striving to work in harmony with the ecological perceptions of a community. This has helped this district to become an agro-ecological oasis in the region, and is now recognised as an Agrobiodiversity Heritage Site by the National Biodiversity Authority. In this process, our work has not just enhanced the food



Sangham members distributing jowar under new PDS

and nutritional security of these communities, but has also enabled them to live a life of dignity and honour, understanding and trusting the ecological role they are playing.

While I cannot recall any major crippling challenges, there are several reasons behind our success, starting with the fact that DDS kept a very low profile right from the beginning. DDS followed the agenda set by the women and never tried to set its own agenda. DDS never tried to “represent” the people it was working with. People represented themselves. Therefore, the struggles were fought by the community and won on their own strength. What could have worked against the DDS was that it did not engage with the rich and powerful sections of the communities. But by the time these groups realised that the strength that the women were acquiring could work against them, it was already too late. The women had empowered themselves.

To conclude, I would like to say that without monetising goals, our work has shown that it is possible to improve the well-being of rural communities and to overcome poverty. As Nagamma, a 70 year old woman from the village of Tekur says, “*the alleviation of poverty in rural areas has to be like a river. Other organisations are like monsoon streams who burst onto the scene, flow forcefully and disappear within weeks. We flow full and calm, bringing life all around us.*” Should this not be the goal of a truly “green economy”?

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