

Continuing Education For Integrated Rural Development

M. Mahbubur Rahman, Ph. D.

OVER one billion people live in absolute poverty in the world and about a billion adults cannot read and write (UNDP 1991:2). In the Asia-Pacific region, 700 million illiterates form the bulk of the 800 million poor people showing a close correlation between poverty and illiteracy (ESCAP 1991a:100). Realizing this alarming situation most governments of the region, UN agencies and international organizations including NGOs have been increasingly contributing to formulation and effective implementation of various strategies for poverty alleviation and expansion of literacy programmes. However, programme linkage between poverty and illiteracy has remained insignificant and equal emphasis has hardly been given on both the problems in most countries.

Rural development or integrated rural development (IRD) has emerged as an important strategy for poverty alleviation in the Asia-Pacific. An IRD programme is successful to the extent its achievements are positively demonstrated at least in terms of human resource development, people's participation, employment, income and resource generation. Such a project can be labelled as sustainable when its beneficiaries reasonably achieve the ability to maintain an acceptable level of net benefits throughout their socio-economic lives.

This paper makes a brief review of the status of adult literacy and continuing education in some selected countries of the Asia-Pacific; examines the relation between continuing education and IRD; and finally focuses on the continuing education experience of the Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP) particularly the potential contribution of its action research to IRD.

Many people in the Asia-Pacific region do not achieve adequate basic learning skills in their primary schools and most of them who drop out of primary school do not go to study in the secondary levels. These people need different types of learning opportunities so that they can retain and improve their basic learning skills and they can continue to learn new knowledge and skills (UNESCO 1991). These learning opportunities can be achieved through continuing education which as a nonformal subsystem of education is well established in the developed countries, and of late its necessity has been felt in the developing countries as well. Literally, there is no illiterate in the United Kingdom but almost six million adults need to improve their basic communication skills. In Bang-

ladesh, over 80 million people are illiterate and at least one-third of the 35 million literates need to improve their learning difficulties through some form of continuing education (Rahman 1991:16). In this paper, continuing education is conceived in the context of IRD as a strategy and human resource development as a goal.

The World Development Report talks about a two-part strategy as an effective way of achieving rapid and politically sustainable improvements in the quality of life for the poor. The first part is the pursuit of a pattern of growth that ensures productive use of the poor's most abundant asset—labour, while the second is widespread provision to the poor of basic social services, especially primary education, primary health care and family planning. According to the report, the first component provides opportunities; the second increase the capacity of the poor to take advantage of these opportunities (World Bank 1990:iii). Another report emphasizes that education, in particular primary education and adult literacy, could become a valuable instrument for poverty alleviation (ESCAP 1991a:91).

Estes observes that despite unparalleled economic accomplishments for some countries and areas in the region, the vast majority (85 per cent) continue to live in extreme poverty, characterised by high levels of fertility, illiteracy, infant and child deaths, malnutrition and squalid living conditions (Estes 1990:54). If we look at statistics we notice three things: Compared with the Southeast, the overall educational performance in the South Asia is rather discouraging; second, massive primary drop-out rates in some countries points to the increasing need for urgent provision of continuing education; and third, educational performance tends to have a positive association with Human Development Index (HDI). Compared with Malaysia and Thailand the educational attainments and HDI is much lower in case of Bangladesh and Nepal.

Continuing Education and IRD: The World Bank studies have shown the effects of education in raising farmers productivity in the Republic of Korea, Malaysia and Thailand (Jamison and Lau 1982) and Nepal and Thailand (Jamison and Moock 1984). These findings have been corroborated by the World Development Report. The report puts:

A growing number of the poor in the developing world find employment in the nonagricultural nonwage-

sector mostly in the informal economy. Not all these workers are poor, but many of the self employed do belong to the poorest segments of society and employment in the informal sector makes up the main part of their family income... More education gives a workers a wider range of self-employment options and allows him or her to choose more profitable alternatives (World Bank 1990:80-81).

Universal primary education and literacy are today recognized throughout Asia and the Pacific to be not only a humanitarian and social development goal but also an essential ingredient for achieving the region's economic development objectives (ESCAP 1991b:118). Singh believes that there is a growing consciousness in the Asia-Pacific that education has a major role to play in accomplishing social goals, and alleviating perceived socio-economic problems of deprivation, poverty and marginalisation. He has envisioned the educational goals as choices relative both to the social purposes and responsibility and to the individual improvement and development (Singh 1991:44). Individual improvement through education is important because "...high levels of human development tend to be achieved within the framework of high level of human freedom" (UNDP 1991:3).

Though the concept of IRD has been in vogue for nearly two decades, it still remains complex as well as elusive. As 'development' itself, IRD has also been evolving over time, with a view to achieving a multiplicity of rural development goals and objectives, applying equally diverse means and strategies (Ahmed and Hossain 1991:12). One of the early attempts of UNESCO has recognized that all rural development projects must be considered in an integrated manner, not only of agriculture and industry but also of transport, trade, credit, health, education, culture sports and leisure activities (UNESCO 1980:14). It conducted a series of activities in the management of educational innovation for rural development (UNESCO 1977:1). In the final phase of these activities Swaminathan (1977) contributed a paper, 'Education for Rural Development' emphasising that education was the catalyst that stimulated the questioning and innovative spirit and promoted imaginative action.

IRD programmes required people's participation at the grassroots. Such participation takes place in a variety of forms, namely the in-

tended beneficiaries of a project participate in basic data collection and information gathering process of their community problems, actively contribute in the identification and formulation of pilot action projects, and in their implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Most IRD programmes in the Asia-Pacific do not succeed because of inadequate people's participation. People usually do not participate because they have not been initially involved in the formulation stages of the projects or the projects are not appropriate to their culture, needs and interest. Their powerlessness, ignorance, illiteracy and peripheral positions in the community are among other major constraining factors. The *raison d'être* of people's participation in IRD is the community based adult literacy and continuing education.

Since the Asia-Pacific economy is dominated by agriculture, continuing education as in IRD can also play a positive role in agricultural extension. The semi-literate farmers can continue their education through group discussions, community interactions, issue-based village seminar-workshops, contact with extension agents and exposure to outside environments. There are ten million farmers in Bangladesh and every nine out of ten of them are basically illiterate. Though 30,000 officials are engaged in agricultural extension, the overall performance in the sector remains far from expectation. In this context, the farmers need to be directly involved in agricultural extension activities in Bangladesh. Such involvement of the farmers can be facilitated through wide provision of adult literacy and continuing education.

CIRDAP's Experience: CIRDAP was established in 1979 as a regional inter-governmental organization at the initiative of the countries of the Asia-Pacific and FAO with support from other concerned UN bodies and donors. The main objectives of the Centre are to: (i) assist national action, (ii) promote regional cooperation, and (iii) act as a servicing institution, for its member countries for promotion of IRD through research, action research, training and information dissemination activities. Amelioration of rural poverty in the Asia-Pacific with people's participation has been the prime concern of the Centre. Its programme activities are set under four areas of concern: (i) agrarian development, (ii) institutional/infrastructural development, (iii) resource development including human resource, and (iv) employment.

—(To be continued)