

Have We Even Tried Asking the Poor?

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The poor may not be the expert on poverty they sometimes are romantically pictured to be but they know better than anyone else what it means to be poor. They need no help to tell poverty from prosperity. They recognize the many faces of poverty as they meet and live these in their everyday. They are experts in coping and survival strategies.

God knows how many meetings on poverty have so far been organized and attended by the non-poor. This is not to make light of these exercises, these meetings might have resulted in some poverty reduction indirectly. The challenge to those concerned is to exert more than what they have done already to find out how the poor themselves can be helped to learn their way out through strategies they themselves design, run and evaluate.

Whenever asked, the poor usually speak of poverty in terms of what they have, can do and can be. An honest-to-goodness poverty strategy or program claiming to be need-driven should start from these. It must confront all the frustrations of the poor about having, doing, and being. But what if the poor demand things only the rich can have, can do and can be? Which can be as impossible, for example, as owning a mansion or joining an exclusive golf club. Whatever, the poor have a right to ask for what they feel they need.

Broad-based growth strategies are mainly oriented to economic growth. Poverty eradication is incidental. The poor are subordinate players in political and economic decision making. And yet they are made to

bear the externalized social and environmental costs of wealth creation. This is basically the story of the 'Asian miracle' which was humbled by the 1997 crisis. Thanks to the crisis we now know better.

A truly broad-based and poverty-focused strategy puts the poor at the center of economic activity. But this can only happen if the poor are first enabled to be at the center of designing poverty strategies and programs. It does not make sense to expect the poor to participate in a big way if they know not how and are not given the space and opportunity to do so.

With such a strategy the nature of economic activity will also change accordingly. Just try, for example, asking a community of poor fishers if they need a 100 million-dollar loan. Chances are, they will say they need only a much smaller amount to finance small and medium-sized livelihood projects. A community wanting to manage a watershed and do agro-forestry likewise would not need that much money. But small loans are not the business of the World Bank and the ADB. These institutions were used to pushing mega loans for mega projects. Whether and how they can adapt their lending policies and operations to the needs of poor communities will certainly be a big test to their new poverty rhetoric.

Helping the poor to help themselves get out of poverty is not easy. That they can assume greater responsibility to build a sustainable society is even harder to imagine for many who are used to relying on the rich and powerful to lead their country to progress.

* EXCERPTS from: *Globalization and poverty eradication in Asia and Pacific*, Asia-Pacific Forum on Poverty, February 2001, Manila, Philippines, Organized by ADB. EXCERPTS prepared by the NGO FORUM ON ADB (FORUM), a network of diverse non-governmental organizations (NGOs), peoples' organizations (POs), community-based organizations and other public interest groups with advocacy and campaigns relating to the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The Manila-based Secretariat can be reached at: Room 402, 107-A Kalayaan Avenue, Diliman, 1101 Quezon City, Philippines; Telefax: +632 9297987; E-mail: forum@pacific.net.ph. Visit our homepage: www15.brinkster.com/ngoforum.