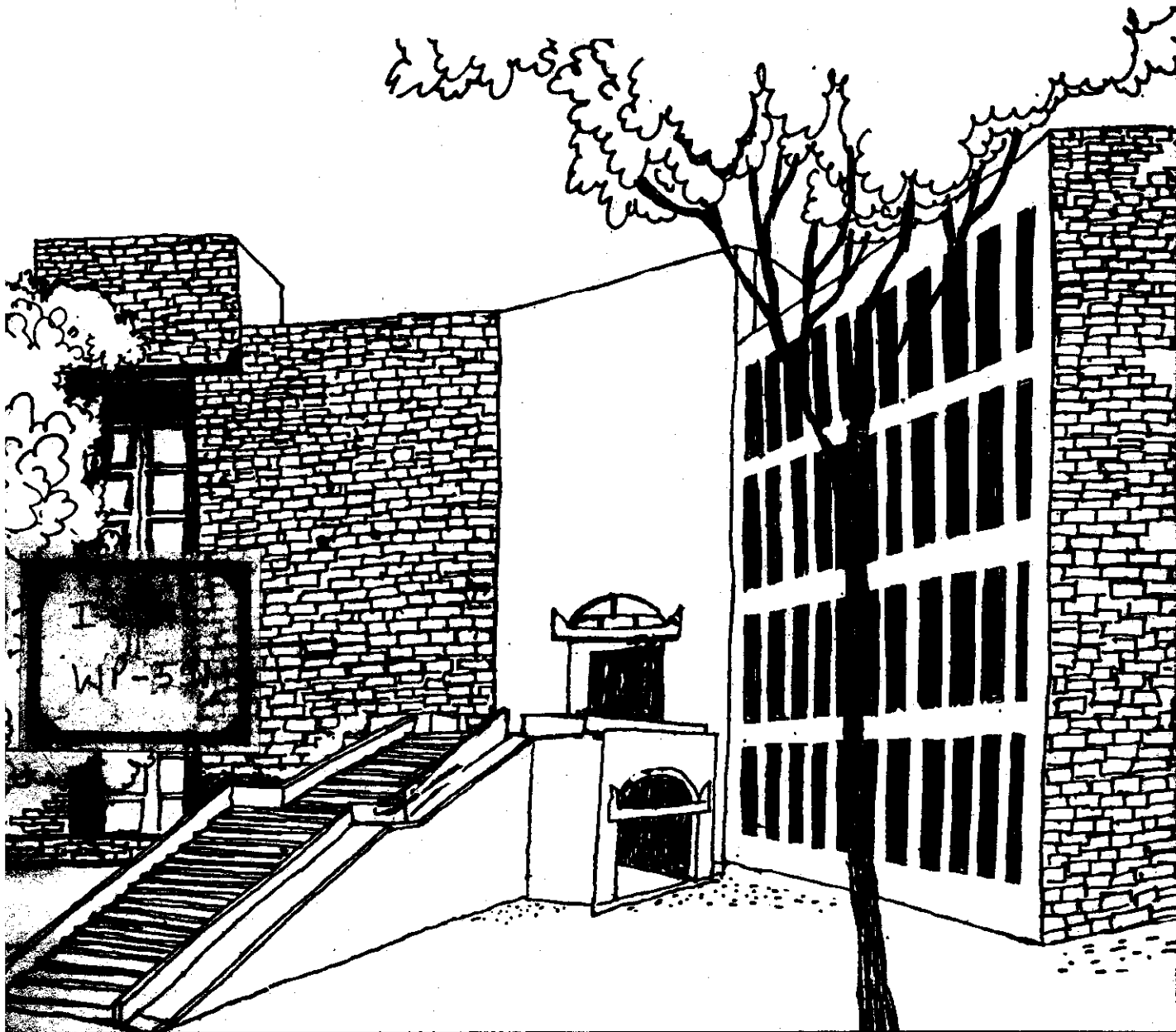


Working Paper



ISSUES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MOST
DISADVANTAGED GROUPS IN SOUTH ASIA

By

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W P No. 591

October 1985

The main objective of the working paper series of the IIMA is to help faculty members to test out their research findings at the pre-publication stage.

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT
AHMEDABAD-380015
INDIA

(591)

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GROUPS IN SOUTH ASIA

Anil Bhatt

The paper discusses the efforts made in the development of the most disadvantaged groups (MDGs) in South Asia. It delineates four broad factors - the social political context of deprivation, the role of the central levels of political and administrative leadership, management and administration of development of the MDG and technology and research - as impeding the development of MDGs.

It argues that a major policy thrust which provides differential services through a separate and differentiated administrative set up which involves the MDG as active and participant group rather than recipient group is called for if the efforts for the development of the MDG is to show any substantial results.

This paper was presented as a key paper at the expert group meeting on the cross-national project on the development of the MDG held at Asia Pacific Development Centre, Kuala Lumpur on 29-31 May, 1985.

ISSUES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MOST DISADVANTAGED
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Anil Bhatt

By early seventies it had become clear that inspite of the emphasis on increasing agricultural production and general developmental thrust the marginalized groups in the Asian region and indeed in whole of the third world were being further pushed to the periphery. The hope of the sixties that once growth and development begins to take place everybody would share the fruits had proved false. Even trickle effect was drying up. From all over there were reports of increasing proportions of the people below poverty line. By eighties the bottom had broadened as observers talked of bottom 30 per cent and 40 per cent instead of 20 per cent.

Neither massive inputs, nor giant projects nor new break throughs in technology had made much dent in massive poverty and suffering. In fact the fruits of new technologies and new discoveries in agriculture had sometimes further reinforced the disparities as in the case of the green revolution in India. Even the governments had openly and officially begun to admit that the benefits of development had not reached the poor.

By mid seventies governments in the developing world had begun to realize that to help the poor and the very poor concerted, differentiated and special efforts will have to be made. That is why the "target group" approach was being increasingly adopted. There were special programmes and schemes for the small and marginal farmers and the landless. Moreover, special emphasis, special concessions, special provisions were being built in the ongoing general programmes of development.

Governments also made some efforts, though sporadic, to bring about some basic changes through legislation and policies. For example, land ceiling, land alienation, debt relief, minimum wages, protection of the rights of those sections who have been traditionally dependent on the forests, legislation to protect the unorganized labour and so on.

In spite of all this, however, by most accounts very little really seems to reach the poor and the most disadvantaged groups. There are many reasons why development efforts have not made much impact in favour of the poor. There are also variety of critiques and approaches put forward. But relevant to our concerns here are four broad issue areas. These are:

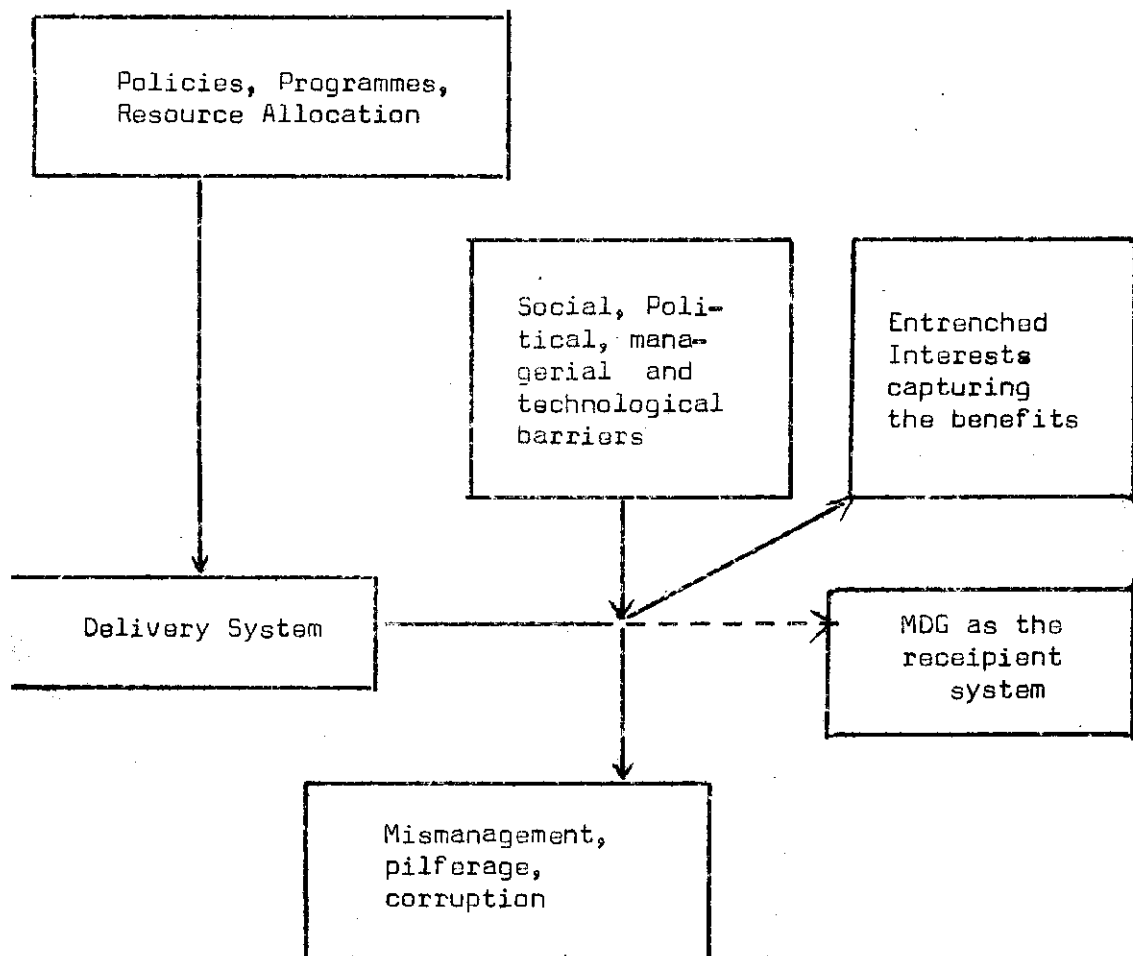
1. The social and political context of deprivation.
2. The role of the higher or central levels of politics and administration.
3. The whole gamut of problems related to the delivery of services which may be broadly categorized as management and administration of development.
4. And finally technology, and research.

There is of course the very basic issue of the fundamental social-structural change. It is based on the belief that the problem of poverty and deprivation lies in the socio-economic structure of the society. The problem of development, therefore, is political not technological and managerial. According to this thesis since the problem of disadvantage and deprivation stems fundamentally from the inequalitarian structure of the society the beneficiaries of the inequalitarian system the elites (the politicians and bureaucrats, the rich and landed, the urban and

educated) who control the power will never be really interested in helping the disadvantaged sections of the society. Because helping the disadvantaged would go against their interest. This argument is ideological and essentially lies in the arena of political action.

The nature of the problem in helping the subsistence farmers and landless labourers as conceptualized is diagrammatically shown below in figure 1.

Figure 1



The Social and Political Context of Deprivation

The most disadvantaged groups have been severely and chronically deprived. Such a deprivation is not only due to economic inequalities but often based on a complex structure of social and traditional stratifications. Such deprivation is based on caste, clan, tribe, race and religion. By the very circumstances of their birth they have been deprived of economic opportunities and also scope for social development. To be sure both ascriptive and economic inequalities reinforce each other and create a grim picture of deprivation and desolation.

This context has very serious implications for the development of the disadvantaged groups having a great deal of bearing on the design of policies and programmes and on the delivery of services.

1. The poor and the deprived are highly dependant on the local entrenched interests - the land lords, money-lenders, traders and local political elite. In many cases traditional forms of exploitation have been replaced by modern activities, institutions and new elite - cooperatives, forest and tribal corporations, contractors, members of Panchayat Raj institutions, lower level bureaucracy and so on. Some times they depend not only economically but even their physical safety may be threatened if they displease these local elite. Since the local elite have vested interests in perpetuating the deprivation they block and even violently oppose any attempts at improvement of these groups.

2. The local elite act as gate keepers to filter or prevent the flow of benefits to the weaker and disadvantaged sections.
3. Local institutions - rural banks, cooperative societies, elected councils are dominated and captured by these elite. The local bureaucracy is also dominated by them and dependent on them. So the benefits to be derived from these institutions, schemes, projects and programmes are syphoned off by the entrenched interests.
4. Paradoxically a more effective and efficient delivery system for the poor requires greater - decentralization, more powers, resources and participatory opportunities at the lower levels. But in the social and political setting of the rural societies of the region greater, the decentralization higher the possibility of power, resources and participation being centralized in the hands of the powerful few at the local level.
5. It has been widely recognized and accepted that the major problem for the development administration is to "reach" the poor. Besides the difficulty of logistics, man power and material resource the biggest difficulty in "reaching" the poor is their social and political context.
6. It is also a major problem for the poor to "reach up" and "pull down" the benefits to them.

The crucial question for any policy maker, therefore, is what kinds of policies, programmes and procedures should be devised that can help both

the delivery system and the poor to overcome the barriers created by the social and political context?

Role of the Central Levels of Politics and Administration

A common observation in regard to development in general is that policies, programmes and plans are good but its implementation is poor. It is because of this assumption that studies, consultations, workshops and programmes all give maximum attention to lower and field levels of administration which are the implementing agencies.

This assumes that the role of central levels of politics and administration is confined to making right policies, design appropriate programmes and allocate adequate resources. Once this is done the lower levels have to take over. At best they can have the blessings of the higher levels of politics and administration.

However, in reality the image of higher levels of administration and politics is not very high or positive at the lower levels. The general image is that higher levels do not support and back up the field administration. There is generally a wide spread feeling that even top levels are weak, indecisive and cannot do much about forcefully implementing the programmes or stand by the lower levels in time of difficulties and crisis.

There is a great credibility gap at lower levels of administration about the top administrative and political leadership.

If lower levels of administration were to overcome the political and social structural barriers they need strong and substantial support from the higher levels which goes beyond mere blessings and exhortations. The maximum support that the field levels need in serving the poor is in case of what is commonly called in administrative circles as "political interference." But it is here that the support is most lacking. They need to be protected and insulated from the local entrenched interests and it is here that the top political leadership has been found generally wanting in helping the programme implementors who are supposed to serve the poor and the weak.

It is not enough for the central political leadership to make pious proclamations or to launch new programmes for poor. Pious proclamations or even launching of programmes and projects are no evidence of strong political will or genuine political commitment towards the poor. During early eighties in one of the states in India the political leadership kept on announcing new schemes and projects at the interval of every few days. Some of these were quite progressive and radical. But once announced many of them were not even taken up for serious consideration. Some of them were launched only for the sake of formality and never continued. After a while such announcements in public meetings were not taken seriously by anybody. And it became a joke in bureaucratic circles that "a programme a day kept the chief minister happy and gay."

Policies, programmes and resource allocation have to be backed up by positive and proactive political action and substantial involvement of higher level authorities. As a district level agricultural official put it,

"everyday we are being exhorted by our superiors and political leaders to work with dedication to serve the poor. But in reality we are given every reason not to do so. In fact, our circumstances always encourage us to serve only the rich and the landed farmers."

This is essentially a process issue but procedures and mechanisms can be devised to generate the necessary climate and processes at higher levels of politics and administration which will support the field level delivery systems to overcome the barriers of management and the social and political circumstances of deprivation of the MDG.

Management and Administration

This includes a whole range of issues dealing with management and administration of delivery of services to small and marginal farmers and landless labourers. Most studies of agricultural development and of development of small or poor farmers in the region have noted and elaborated on these problems in great details. These particularly deal with field levels of administration. Some of the major ones are:

1. Coordination: In the last two decades there have been bewildering variety of agencies and it has created tremendous problems of overlap, duplication, sequencing, delays and even corruption. Not only the beneficiaries but even the field officials have been vexed and tormented by the problems of coordination among agencies. The severe problem of coordination has affected agricultural management in general but it has particularly negatively affected the MDG as they have no time, skills, information, social status and risk-taking

capacity to deal with variety of agencies and go from pillar to post. On the other hand the situation of multiple agencies favours the established farmers who are better situated to have access as well as influence with government agencies.

2. Administrative Structures and Procedures: Governments in the region have been quite quick in launching new programmes, projects and setting up new agencies and organizations. In matters of development the old departmental form has increasingly given way to agency, corporation, authority, boards, commissions and committee forms of organization. This is done on the ground that departmental form has become obsolete for developmental work and to do effective and efficient development organization structure need to be changed. But within these macro organization structure changes same old routine procedures and administrative arrangements continue. Thus, personnel system, paper work and procedures, hierarchy and chain of command, financial autonomy and flexibility, monitoring, supervision and control, work load, target setting, staffing, postings and transfers of officials, are all in the old bureaucratic style entirely unsuited for a dynamic machinery required to serve the poor.

3. Input supply and Infrastructures: Almost universal experience is the great difficulty that the weaker sections of the society face in getting inputs of supply and access to infrastructure facilities such as seeds, fertilizers, equipments, water, roads, markets, transportation etc. In general supply is inadequate, irregular and it rarely reaches the poor farmer and landless labourers. Similarly infrastructure facilities are also scarce, and poor have difficult access to these.

Moreover, another problem for the poor is the cost effectiveness of the inputs even when available. A recent study dealing with seven Asian countries noted that unremunerative prices, particularly for foodgrains has a direct and demaging impact on the use of purchased inputs by small farmers. Similarly because of the location of small farms and the dominance of the entrenched interests small and poor farmers have great difficulty in getting regular water supply from public irrigation schemes. The landless tribals who depend on collecting and selling forest produce rarely get facilities to sell these at reasonable prices. Since they sell it to private traders they almost always get cheated and exploited.

4. Credit: Regular, timely and adequate credit has always been a major problem for the poor and disadvantaged groups. Inaccessibility of the government offices, and officials lack of information about rules, regulations and location; elaborate cumbersome and circuitous procedures; harassment and corruption by officials and touts, are the major problems in supplying credit to the poor. Moreover, for those groups who do not hold any land or assets - those who are landless labourers, tribals depending on forests, small fishermen, artisans - very few facilities and provisions for credit are available. It is only in the last few years that governments have begun to pay some attention to the land less rural poor. But these efforts have been generally inadequate, sporadic and unsystematic.

5. Extension: The management of extension services to the most disadvantaged groups suffer from all the administrative problems mentioned above in (2). And extension work in relation to MDG has suffered most from these problems of management and administration.

The service conditions - salary, perks, transport, postings and transfers, work load, coverage and targets - are generally not very supportive for extension workers to be able to give concerted effort and more attention that the MDG would need.

There is of course the major issue of research-extension linkage which has now been extensively documented. But most importantly, the social and political context of the most disadvantaged groups does not provide any motivation for the extension officials to serve them. It is easier to contact big farmers, persuade them to accept the new methods or other inputs, and relatively easier to get them the delivery of services from different agencies. Disadvantaged groups are generally concentrated in hilly, forest and interior areas which are difficult to reach for the extension officials whose workload is heavy, coverage is extensive and transport facilities inadequate. Also because of the political dominance of the landed rural elite it is politically more rewarding and safe for the extension official to serve them rather than the poor.

It is much easier to fulfil the targets, show a better work record, improve chances of rewards in the career (preferred postings, promotions, superior's satisfaction and favours, political support), if the extension worker serves the dominant groups rather than deprived groups.

The issue of management and Administration call for series of changes and reforms that relate to policies, programme designs, management development, administrative reforms and nity gritty of operations. It also needs to be underlined though that many of the management and administration problems in the development of the most disadvantaged groups essentially emanate from the social and political context of deprivation and the role (or lack of it) of the central levles of political and administrative leadership.

Technology and Research

The decades of sixties and seventies have seen major technological break throughs. As a result of this, there has been considerable increase in agriculture production. But it has been mainly useful for large and medium farmers as it has mainly concentrated on individual crops and single components of agricultural production. But the problem of small farmers is to maximise income from very small holdings with minimum of risk-taking. They need the kind of research which will provide a technology for the whole farm management.

Secondly, technologies for better and more fertile soils are more easily available than for drier, less fertile, hilly, drought prone agro-climates where most disadvantaged groups are generally in greater numbers. Many of the technological improvements recommended to subsistence farmers have turned out to be inappropriate, costly, risky and incomplete.

For those disadvantaged groups who do not hold any land but depend on labour or home based industry there is hardly any research and technology available. Recently, governments in the region have paid some attention to village and cottage industry, poultry, dairy and similar activities but most of them have proved economically unviable for the very poor assetless people inspite of heavy subsidies. Research and technological innovations have to be directed to the needs of the landless MDG too.

The nature of the issue here is basically one of emphasis in the policies for research and technology, and of management of research and technology for the poor.

There is thus a whole gamut of issues that deal with socio-political environment, policies, processes and operations management in helping the most disadvantaged groups to develop.

Conceptualization of the MDGs as Partners instead of Clients

The crux of the problem, however, is to generate the participation of the bottom most sections of the society by mobilizing and organizing them. Experience seems to suggest that this is perhaps the most effective way not only of over coming the severe barriers emanating from their socio-political environment but also making the higher level political and administrative leadership and the field level delivery system responsive to the needs and problems of the MDG.

Since seventies, when greater and more explicit emphasis is being given towards the poor, they have been conceptualized in a rather paternalistic fashion as recipients and beneficiaries. It is the delivery system that knows best what to deliver and how to deliver. Poor have to be only the recipients. The suggestions for changes and action emphasize improvements in the delivery system but not on how to change the recipient system into a participant, demanding, monitoring and to some extent a self-managing system.

If the MDGs become active participants and partners, if they mobilize and organize themselves, if they make demands and assert their rights then they can more effectively overcome the circumstances of their deprivation and force the delivery system to respond.

Most efforts in the mobilization and organization of small farmers and landless labourers have been defunct or remained on paper where initiated under official banner and by the regular bureaucracy. Often those efforts have been dominated and manipulated by the local elite.

On the other hand, when such attempts have been made by committed independent voluntary organizations or for special pilot projects with special provisions exclusively meant for the disadvantaged groups and where such attempts have received special attention of the higher levels of political and administrative leadership they have been remarkably effective and successful. This is because they have been insulated from the social and political environment, and from the usual limitations of bureaucratic management.

Three Major Policy Thrusts

Attempts at decentralization and participation will bear fruits for the poor only if they are exclusively for the small farmers. If attempts at development of the most disadvantaged groups are to be effective then approaches have to be developed which either insulate (or avoid) or confront the oppressive social and political environment in which MDG struggle to survive.

The later approach calls for political action. If the former approach is to be effectively implemented three major policy thrusts will be necessary.

First, is the separate organizations of the MDG which we have discussed above.

Second, separate and exclusive programmes for the development of the MDG.

And third, a separate delivery system which will manage the separate programmes of development in partnership and collaboration with the separate organizations of the MDG.

In the last fifteen years or so governments of the region have increasingly launched schemes, projects and programmes exclusively for the poor. It has now been generally accepted by the governments of the region that the poor will need such differential attention. This issue, therefore, is not elaborated here.

Separate Delivery System for the MDG

While this approach of having separate programmes for the small and poor farmers is now slowly being accepted, a separate administration for the delivery of services to the small farmers has not yet been generally thought of. Even specially designed programmes for the poor are mostly implemented by the administration dealing with all other agricultural programmes and routine administration. That is why even special programmes do not always yield desired results.

If the poor are to be protected from the prevailing social context in the rural areas then the administration for the poor has also to be protected. Another bold policy initiative from the national level, therefore, will have to be in the direction of a special and separate administration for the small farmer. Thus, if special programmes for the small farmers are needed then special administration for implementing these programmes is also needed.

This is not to add to the multiplicity of agencies and the confusion of coordination with which agricultural and rural development administration is besieged every where. On the contrary such an administrative arrangement if properly and boldly designed should help reduce the problem of coordination and its consequences - delays, corruption, inter-departmental rivalries, frustration and demotivation at least as far as delivery of services to the small farmers is concerned.

The separate administrative set up will have to be strong and self-sufficient in the sense that all the various components of inputs, credit, extension and other services should be brought within the fold of this MDG agency. Wherever its dependence on other agencies is unavoidable like major infra-structure services or canal irrigation then special quotas should be reserved for the small farmers. The department concerned should be held accountable for providing such inputs and its accountability should be ensured at the highest level.

This separate administration should be set up from the lowest level up to at least district and provincial or divisional level. If at the district level it is merged with the general agricultural department then its purpose will not be served. Even at the state or national level there should be a separate cell monitoring its activities.

This might mean some more deployment of resources and increase in budget. But if carefully worked out then it may not increase the budget a great deal. At lower echelons of administration this might also mean some overlap and to a certain extent a parallel system. But looking to the present bewildering variety of agencies and the resultant confusion such a parallel system could be very effective for the small farmer. It should reduce the problems created by the multiplicity of agencies both for the small farmers and the officials serving them. In such a system poor farmers would be contacted by fewer workers and they would go to only one department or agency for most of their needs. The officials serving the small farmers would also not be dependent on too many agencies. Such an administration will have to be well thought out, comprehensive and tightly designed in order that the resources are not over taxed.

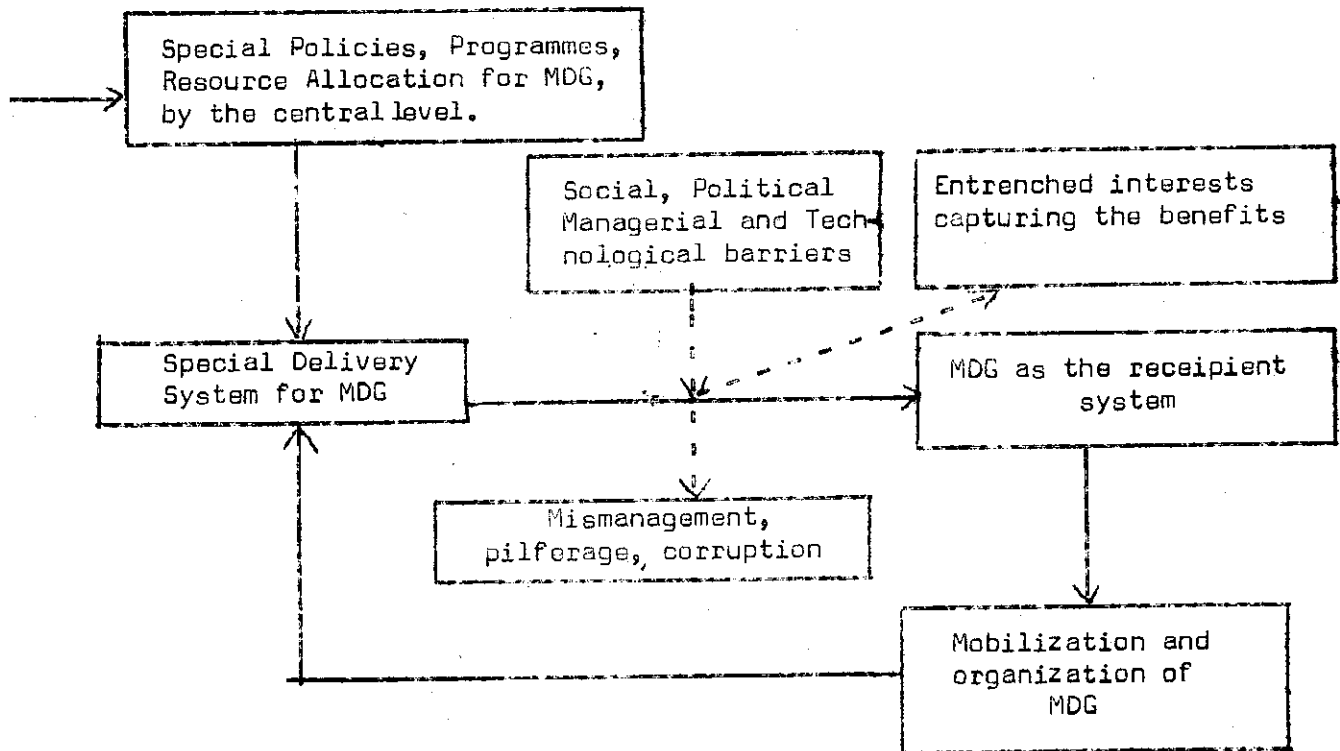
In this separate administrative system where officials, all the way up to district and provincial levels are serving only the small farmers then their dependence on the entrenched and dominant interests would also be reduced. They will have relative freedom to serve the small farmers. Also they will be under greater pressure to serve the small farmers. They will have fewer official or non-official excuses not to contact small farmers. Their performance will not be judged in terms of target fulfilment in general but their work in relation to the small farmers only.

A separate administration for the delivery of services to the small farmers is not as unfamiliar or as drastic as it might at first glance seem. As noted earlier most governments in the region have launched programmes specially and exclusively for the small and marginal farmers. Also in some cases special organizations like the Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA) in India or Landless Labourers' Cooperatives in Bangladesh exist. In few cases some simplified administrative procedures, special recruitment or special allowances to the workers in case of small farmer programmes have also been tried out. In case of FAO's Small Farmer Development Programme (SFDP) in the region most governments have permitted at least at the level of group organizers, separate recruitment and separate service conditions etc. In a rural finance experiment in Bangladesh considerable success was achieved by setting up a special organization for the target groups. 82% of the borrowers were within target groups. Overdues were less than 4% and the project attained financial viability. The special organization made possible direct communication between the bank officials and the target groups and reduced the influence of the dominant groups and the political touts. A separate full-fledged administration

for the small farmers would make these sporadic, ad hoc and isolated attempts stronger and more comprehensive.

Separate programmes for the small and poor farmers and landless labourers, with separate organizations of the poor served by a separate delivery system would go a long way in insulating both the poor and the field level delivery system from the oppressive socio-political context and thereby reduce the incidence of benefits being syphoned off by the vested interests, corruption, wastage and pilferage. It would also dramatically improve the processes and operations management, and create pressures for the relevant technology and research. This reconceptualization can be diagrammatically shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2



As shown in Figure 2 a differential policy and programme package with a differential administrative machinery will be needed for a highly differentiated social structure if the social, political, managerial and technological impediments to the development of the MDG are to be overcome.
