

Bringing the poor on the dialogue table

The poor have skills, are politically conscious, and are aware of the need for schooling for the children and taking care of their health and also planning a future for their families. However, their lack of income makes it impossible for them to monetize their skills and thereby improve the quality of their life. Providing investment capital for additional income generation can unlock their potential to solve many, if not all, of the manifestations of poverty. This has to be supplemented by skill development, proper marketing support and appropriate monetary compensation for their skills and produce.

During my efforts in development finance and rural development work for over three decades, I have seen projects and strategies succeed as well as fail. I have seen misguided project designs, poor implementation and squandering of large sums of money. But I have also witnessed incredible achievements. When development works well, it can transform lives by providing the underprivileged the capital and knowledge that can open up opportunities for them and reduce their poverty.

The development community seems constantly and restlessly in search of a singular approach that will solve poverty, unveiling new buzzwords every few years only to toss them aside. The fundamental flaw with this system is that each new approach fails to break out of the underlying technocratic and specialized paradigm.

We must understand that there is no precooked blueprint for replication. Individuals can make a difference in fighting poverty when ways are found to institutionalize creative ideas. Replication of successful models continues to be a guiding mantra of development programmers. But an associated caveat when examining specific experiences with replication in mind is the personal charisma of inspirational leaders and organizational synergies, both of which are not readily transferable. We must respect the fundamental truth that charisma and passion cannot be transfused. We need to have charismatic and highly motivated leaders to lead programmers. It is equally important that we must appropriately reward and recognize good performance so as to further enhance the quality of leadership. Leadership finally remains the most crucial element of the success of any new initiative. There is vast difference in being a rural banker by choice and in being one by chance. So is the case with any other development institution or agency. Imposing of unwilling leaders has been the bane of most development programmers.

Poverty reduction is not a discipline. You can't get somebody from a university who has done a Ph.D. in poverty reduction. Nor is there a talisman for eradicating poverty. It may not be possible to locate a common denominator for a successful rural manager. It may also not be possible to lay down a standard blueprint for a rural development programmed. From their own experience, rural banking veterans can spell out the ingredients that one may need to be successful. But the new managers shall have to work out their own recipes for blending these ingredients in the right proportions. There is so much cultural diversity even in neighboring villages that a blueprint for one village may need a drastic change for a village next to it.

The policy makers who dominate most discussions on the problems of the poor keep waxing rhapsodic about the great possibilities of their plans and strategies serving each sentence like an expertly bowled cricket ball. They release their epigrams like pet doves. The palatial décor of the conference rooms is what is talked about in ostentatious tea breaks. Conferences are substituted

for work. Perquisites are substituted for truly earned rewards — and there are no penalties for corruption, laziness and divisive rabble-rousing. Adept at diplomacy and wordplay, these leaders obscure the real concerns behind a fog of jargon and euphemism.

No wonder the villages distrust all these urbanized gentry who jeep themselves into the village, complete with their pageantry, exhorting the local population to produce fewer babies and more food for the benefit of their urban brethren. There is no mention of the exploitative prices for their produce that has been the key cause of their impoverishment. They deliver these messages to the villages, and hastily jeep their way back to their urban environment. The policy wonks and mandarins keep barricading themselves against the political or journalistic assaults with their trained staff ring fencing them. They would make a valiant and often brilliant pitch to sway the young lot but mostly the pitch would be badly off key. Much disservice has been done to the cause of rural development on account of this schizoid approach: alternating engagement and withdrawal. It is easy to dish out lectures on development finance; but it is an arduous experience to practice it.

I firmly believe it is possible to eliminate poverty in our country—provided we re-examine the received wisdom of our assumptions. The poor are poor not because they are unskilled or illiterate but because they cannot retain the returns of their labor. They neither own capital, nor does anyone give them access to credit, except on the most unreasonable terms. They live on the edge, in constant fear of a catastrophe or tragedy. But they have no insurance because insurance companies consider them a losing proposition. The State's social safety nets are not only grossly inadequate but mired in corruption and bureaucratic red tape.

We need to bring in the poor to the conversation. Interventions that take the end user into account almost always have better success rates than top down decision-making ones. Many social enterprises are still not talking enough to their poor customers to find out what they really want, and too often policy makers have no idea what their end beneficiaries really need. Let us hope that the expanding use of technology across all segments of society will help to create platforms for exchange of ideas, so that people can better express their needs and there is a more meaningful exchange of information,.