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Deforestation and Rural Poverty in Developing Countries: The Role of Social Work

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To alleviate rural poverty most developing countries have been launching a wide variety of rural development activities. In this paper I discuss the relationship between deforestation and rural poverty, policies governing reforestation initiatives and the role of social workers in these efforts. The paper argues for and illustrates the various roles social workers can play in development programs to alleviate rural poverty in developing countries.

Developing countries, to promote social and economic development of rural areas, have been launching programs that cover a wide range of sectors such as reforestation, irrigation and drinking water improvement, innovative farming techniques, primary health care facilities, and training and human capital development. At the community level these programs are implemented by governments, bilateral or multilateral organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Much has been written on the failure of these development organizations to achieve community self-reliance and sustainable development. These development organizations often lack staff with skills in community work. Social workers' participation in these rural development initiatives, so far, has been minimal. Like in industrialized countries of the west, most social work professionals in developing countries are employed by the public sector and are engaged in remedial social welfare work with individuals, groups and communities (Midgley, 1981). Yet, their professional skills are most needed in social and economic development.

In this paper I discuss the role of social workers in development using community reforestation initiatives as an illustration. I present the relationship between deforestation and rural poverty, policies governing reforestation initiatives, and the role of social workers in these reforestation programs.

Background

Forest resources are declining at an alarming rate in developing countries, especially in those areas where rural poor are concentrated. The Tenth World Forestry Congress held in France in September of 1991 declared that 17 million hectares of forests disappear annually (Proceedings of the 10th World Forestry Congress, 1991). This Congress concluded that "the real causes of deforestation in developing countries are poverty, debt, underdevelopment, and the requirement to meet the basic needs of rapidly growing populations" (Proceedings of the 10th World Forestry Congress, 1991, p. 21). The decline of forest resources "perpetuates poverty, as degraded ecosystems offer diminishing yields to their poor inhabitants" (Durning, 1989, p. 40). This adversely affects the rural poor because they rely on wood and non-wood forest resources for their basic needs (Burman, 1990; Jodha, 1992; Pandey, 1989; 1990; Pandey & Yadama, 1990; Tewari, 1989). Rural poor, especially women and children, collect fuelwood, fodder, fruits, mushrooms, medicinal herbs, nuts, honey, bamboo and grass to make baskets and mattresses; hemp to make ropes; and bark to make paper for household use or for sale to supplement household income (Durning, 1989; Jodha, 1992; Kaur, 1991; Pandey & Yadama, 1990). According to 1980 figures, two billion people in the developing countries were dependent on fuelwood, 1.05 billion of whom had insufficient access to fuelwood and another 100 million of whom were unable to obtain even the minimum fuel required for cooking and heating (Economic Development Institute of the World Bank, 1989). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) forecasted that by the year 2000 at least 2.4 billion people will be facing fuelwood shortages if current trends continue (Rodas, 1985). The developing countries need to plant 669,000 hectares yearly to meet fuelwood requirements by the year 2000, but their current programs reforest less than ten percent of what is needed (Chandrasekharan, 1985).

Rural poverty and the decline of forest resources are linked. More than one billion people in the developing countries today live in poverty (World Bank, 1991), and most of them live in rural areas. The majority of women and children in developing

countries live in rural areas. About 94% of women in Nepal, 75% of women in India, 84% of women in Bangladesh and 72% of women in Pakistan live in rural areas (United Nations, 1991). Even after the differences in cost of living between urban and rural areas is accounted for, poverty is considered extreme in the rural areas of developing countries (World Bank, 1990). Poor people, particularly women, in developing countries are working more hours a week to maintain their meager living standards (United Nations, 1991), and many are spending more and more of their time collecting scarce forest resources. For instance, in Nepal, women and girls spend approximately 60 days/year/family collecting fuelwood (World Bank, March 1980). In Niamey, Niger women have to go 25 to 30 kilometers to collect twigs to cook their meals (Pisani, 1991). "In Ouagadougou the wood under the pan is often more expensive than the food in the pan" (Pisani, 1991, p. 65). Governments in the developing countries will not be able to provide alternative energy options, such as gas or electricity, for all the poor in the near future. Rural women and children, therefore, have to continue to rely on scarce forest resources for fuel, fodder and other basic needs.

Community Reforestation Policies and Rural Development

The linkage between reforestation programs and alleviation of rural poverty was first acknowledged at the Eighth World Forestry Congress in Jakarta in 1978. This congress advocated participation of rural people in forest management as a part of rural development. In the same year, the World Bank issued a new forest-related policy statement emphasizing rural development forestry (Pardo, 1985). In 1980, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) articulated the close connection between rural development and reforestation strategies in the following recommendations: a) forestry strategies must be based on the active and voluntary participation of the rural poor; b) forests, forest lands and forest industries should hold a significant potential for the alleviation of poverty and for promoting social change in rural areas; and c) forestry policies must be oriented and designed to support rural development on a permanent basis (Rao, 1987a; 1987b). The Tenth World Forestry Congress stated

that "forest resources are an important factor of socio-economic development, and especially of rural development" (Proceedings of the 10th World Forestry Congress, 1991, p. 21). It recommended "that communities be involved in the integrated management of their land and that they be provided with the necessary institutional, technical and financial means" (Proceedings of the 10th World Forestry Congress, 1991, p. 23) to enhance their ability to manage their land.

Forest policies in developing countries are translated into rural development programs in the form of community forestry. These programs are either implemented directly by government agencies or in collaboration with bilateral and multilateral organizations. For instance, the Nepal Australia Forestry Project (NAFP), a bilateral Australian aid project to Nepal, has been successfully reforesting degraded community lands with the support of local people since 1976. Many community forestry programs have also been implemented as a component of integrated rural development programs focusing on several sectors simultaneously, such as agriculture, forestry, livestock, irrigation, drinking water, health and education.

Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also been implementing community forestry programs in developing countries. These NGOs are seen as more flexible, less bureaucratic, staffed by committed persons, and more effective in designing and implementing community participatory forest programs (Rao, 1987b; WRI, 1987). NGOs can develop and implement locally desired programs and services more efficiently, achieve direct community participation, and engage in policy advocacy and social action (Bratton, 1990; Brown & Korten, 1991; Midgley, Hall, Hardiman, & Narine, 1986; Pandey, 1988).

Some of the important social factors that contribute to community self-reliance and sustainable rural community development involve an understanding of local populations and institutions; gaining community trust, community participation and empowerment; an understanding of the root causes of community conflicts and a will to resolve them; and designing and implementing need-based programs. Oakley (1991) argues that the rural community's greater participation in development is crucial to increase program efficiency and effectiveness, to encourage their self-reliance and to increase program coverage. Evaluation

studies of development programs, however, indicate that many of these programs are externally controlled and designed and implemented from the top-down with very little understanding of local community or input from them (Kottak, 1985; Oakley, 1991; Uphoff, 1985; Utting, 1994).

Kottak (1985) content-analyzed sixty-eight impact evaluation studies of World Bank-assisted rural development projects from the 1960s and early 1970s around the world. He found that 59% of these projects failed to achieve their goals because of socio-cultural and economic incompatibility in their design and implementation. Project designers had not paid adequate attention to sociocultural dimensions of local populations such as community demographic characteristics, local formal and informal institutions, local economy, and community leadership.

Successful projects, on the other hand, had followed people-oriented project development and implementation strategies (Kottak, 1985). Referring to the adverse impact of forest policies and programs of the 1980s on the rural poor in Central America, Utting (1994) argues that these policies and programs were often developed without adequately understanding and incorporating into the project design the socio-economic and political aspects of community life in rural areas. He insists that forest policies and programs must be developed within a broader social and economic development context and that "human welfare must involve intensive dialogue with various local groups in the design stage of forest protection or tree planting programmes and projects" (pp. 245–246).

Uphoff (1985) also provides insight into several World Bank funded integrated rural development projects that lacked community participation in planning and implementation. He implies that lack of community participation in decision making resulted in numerous problems in implementing these projects and in achieving stated goals and objectives. In another example, an integrated primary health care project in India had listed promoting community participation as one of its objectives; yet in reality, local participation was reduced to service utilization (Pandey & Braaton, 1994).

Similar examples of failing to involve local populations as equal partners have been widely documented in community forestry programs implemented by governmental and non-

governmental organizations (Bratton, 1989; Brett, 1993). A study of people's participation, trust, and benefit sharing in non-governmental and governmental social forestry projects in Southern India indicated that the poor people of these areas did not feel that NGOs were more trustworthy and effective than the GOs (Yadama, 1990; 1995). Furthermore, Yadama found that there was no difference in the level of poor people's participation in planning and decision making between the governmental and non-governmental social forestry projects.

Even though NGOs are staffed by committed and motivated people many of these employees lack professional community work skills. As a result, they are not as effective in their ability to gain community trust and community participation. Social workers are uniquely trained to engage in rural development through these development organizations. They can effectively gain community trust and community participation, help identify a community's strength and limitations, help mobilize internal resources, and link the local community to various external resources.

There are many forms of community participation in rural development. In some projects there is a lack of real local participation; local people provide information, labor, give opinion upon request, or use services but lack decision making power and do not have a say in project design and implementation (Drijver, 1991). Oakley (1991) calls this means or passive participation. When participation is used as a means, local participation is sought to achieve a predetermined goal of development projects, and participation dwindles once the task is completed (Oakley, 1991).

In true community participation local people make major decisions concerning the design and implementation of development projects, and project staff are catalysts and intermediaries (Drijver, 1991). Oakley (1991) calls this form of people's participation as an end. Here community participation is an active and dynamic process "which unfolds over time and whose purpose is to develop and strengthen the capabilities of rural people to intervene more directly in development initiatives. Such a process may not have predetermined measurable objectives or even direction. As an end in itself, participation should be a permanent

feature of any development project, an intrinsic part which grows and strengthens as the project develops" (p. 116). The community participation process itself can empower rural people because it contributes to communication, leadership and bargaining skills enabling local people to decide upon and take actions they believe are necessary for their development (Oakley, 1991).

The Role of Social Work in Development

As is evident, rural development—be it forestry, health or agriculture-related—has to do with eliciting the trust of people, fully involving them and ensuring that the benefits reach people in the lower rungs of the economic order. This is the *raison d'être* of social work. Social workers, however, have been marginal players in rural development. Midgley (1981) concludes that this is due to the transfer of an inappropriate, individual focused, social work educational package from the Western industrialized countries to the developing countries. The social work as a profession originated in western, industrial countries at around the same time as the concept of rural development in developing countries, particularly South Asia. The initial emphases of the two were similar. Rural development programs between the mid 1920s and the early 1950s were localized individually initiated; they focused primarily on the welfare of individuals and changes in social and mostly non-economic sectors. For example, the Gandhian philosophy of rural development was a social movement to empower rural populations to help themselves. The social work profession developed primarily to ameliorate social problems through *individual rehabilitation* using the methods of casework, group work or community organization (Midgley, 1981). Over the years many developing countries have adopted social work teaching with the same practice principles as those employed in the west (Midgley, 1981).

The focus of rural development, on the other hand, has shifted over the years. By the 1950s developing countries began launching various national-level rural development strategies that primarily focused on the economic development of rural populations. To boost these national development initiatives, a wide variety of human and material technologies were transferred from

the western industrialized countries to the developing countries. Critics argue that a transfer-based rural development framework failed to achieve desired goals because of central, top-down, controlled design and implementation of development programs with no input from local people (Wignaraja, 1984). In the 1970s there was a growing awareness of the need for people's participation in rural development to avoid local people's financial or other forms of dependence on development projects (Chambers, 1983; Uphoff, 1985). In the early 1980s, greater emphasis was placed on strengthening or building institutions and on gaining people's real or direct participation in rural development. A goal to accomplish sustainable development was added after the mid 1980s.

Social work has been on the side-lines in this transformation of rural development. As a profession, social work in developing countries has suffered from cultural imperialism (Midgley, 1981), and this has affected its contribution to rural development. Another factor that explains the marginal role of social workers in development is that during the 1960s and 1970s, most rural development work in developing countries was undertaken without much attention paid to social and cultural dimensions or input from social scientists. For instance, forest departments managed the state forests but their management systems were externally engineered and imposed. Forest professionals enforced forest laws to protect forests from people.

The Private Forest Nationalization Act of 1957 in Nepal gave the forest department full responsibility to manage all forest land including private forest lands of the nation. The 1978 Forest Act of Lesotho gave its Forest Division the legal rights to exclusively manage and control all the village woodlots in the country (Turner, 1988). In the early 1970s, Ghana dissolved all traditional forest rights of tribal groups and its central government assumed sole control of all forest land (Repetto, 1988). Critics argue that centralized management of forest land increased the rate of forest depletion, since local people saw no incentive to manage their neighboring forest resources (Bajracharya, 1983; Repetto, 1988).

The participation of sociologists and anthropologists in community forestry programs increased, particularly in the 1980s. Today, forest policy makers around the world recognize that in

order to reverse the current trend in the decline of forest resources, they must take into account the socio-cultural dimensions of a community and ensure community participation. To that end governments in developing countries have been amending forest policies and shifting control of forest lands from the state to decentralized local people's institutions (Campbell & Khare, 1992). For example, the Decentralization Act of 1982 in Nepal (amended in 1984 and 1992) recognized community management of village forests by legally ensuring the rights of resource user groups to manage and retain the products of forest resources under their jurisdiction.

Social workers, likewise, should claim their share of professional responsibility in social and economic development of communities not only because this new development paradigm is increasingly interdisciplinary and community focused but also because social workers are better suited to participate in development. Today's rural development programs, including community forestry programs, focus on communities. Sustainability of a rural development initiative depends upon a community's ability to work together to mobilize external and internal financial, managerial, and technical resources so that useful programs may continue to expand after their external support terminates. A professionally trained community social worker can earn community trust, help local people identify their strengths and limitations, strengthen or build institutions for their collective action, and help them mobilize external and internal resources so that project activities attain long-term sustainability.

Midgley (1981) describes community social workers as professionals who

know how community institutions function, how local political processes operate and how community needs arise . . . have a detailed knowledge of the demographic, political and economic characteristics of the community, understand its social structure and be able to undertake research into community needs. Community workers use their professional skills to establish and maintain good relationships with community leaders and citizens. They motivate people to participate in welfare activities and foster an attitude of concern and responsibility in the community. They assist community leaders to take decisions effectively but democratically and are able to deal

with problems and conflicts which arise in ways that do not cause resentment (p. 10).

These skills are crucial in rural development.

In the early 1980s I, as a project social scientist, was working with a bilateral, USAID funded, resource conservation project in remote parts of Nepal. Shortly after the design and implementation of project activities, the project had identified a need for social scientists and hired an anthropologist and a social worker. Among other things, our responsibilities included promoting local people's participation, institution building and conflict resolution. We identified potential project activity beneficiaries, engaged them in various stages of project design and implementation, and helped form user group committees around various project activities including community forestry. We also helped promote locally preferred plant species in project established plant nurseries, promoted women's involvement in the management of forest resources at different levels, identified qualified women for admission into forestry schools (see Pandey, 1986 for details) and helped forestry professionals become sensitive to local people's needs through our work with the faculty and students of forestry.

Even in situations where our expertise was sought after the activity had been completed, we were able to engage local people in some marginal ways. For instance, in one village this project had built a drinking water system. Project activities were centrally designed and implemented with very little input from the people. We helped hand over the responsibility of maintaining the system to local people. We identified all those households who used the water system and met with those in a household who were responsible for collecting water. Women did almost all of the water collection in this village. To increase women's participation, we met late in the evening to discuss maintenance of the water system and remuneration of the maintenance person. These women selected a woman to maintain the system; men, they said, migrate to cities during the slack season of the year. They felt that it was more practical to train a woman to maintain the system.

The next issue they had to address was the development of an appropriate remuneration system for the maintenance person.

These women had very limited access to cash, so they were not able to pay the water maintenance person in cash. However, each household had been maintaining a forest guard, a cobbler, a blacksmith and a tailor for generations, and they paid all of them in kind (grain) every year after harvesting their crops. They decided that the same method of payment for the maintenance of the water system would work well. Here is an example of how social workers can identify existing institutions (knowledge) that are effective and expand the same idea to promote successful collective action.

In another village we helped resolve a conflict between the project staff and villagers. In this village, project engineers had surveyed two rivers, possibly to tap one of them for irrigation. When the staff had completed all survey work and was ready to launch the project, the villagers opposed this particular initiative. We were assigned to resolve this conflict. Sometimes when villagers are opposed to a particular project activity, that in itself is an act of participation and may help prevent a socioculturally inappropriate intervention (Drijver, 1991). On our first visit to the project site, however, it became evident that project staff had made all the decisions up to that point without much input from the local people. This particular conflict was resolved after several meetings with the villagers.

Since the project design phase had already been completed, our efforts were mainly around clarifying some of the misunderstandings. First, a clarification was needed on which one of the two rivers had been selected for irrigation canal and why? This required sharing of the findings of the feasibility studies and a discussion on why irrigation of the river the village headman had preferred was not technically feasible. A discussion then ensued on the scope of the proposed irrigation project. This involved a lengthy discussion of whose land would be covered and whose would not be covered. Next we clarified what the project might do with the money if that village rejected the irrigation project. The project staff had planned to divert the irrigation project to another village for the same purpose. In the end, the villagers agreed to the project, especially when it was evident that the irrigation project would go to another village. But the most important outcome of these dialogues was that they felt respected and included in the

project process; and the project engineers sensed the importance of community participation in development.

Preparing Social Workers for Rural Development

Issues concerning equity, equality and social justice are and should be at the core of every social worker's practice. Social workers are better suited to identify problems and issues concerning the root causes of poverty and social and economic injustice; they can better assess the distributive impact of various social and economic development programs. In developing countries, forest policies and programs directly affect the lives of the rural poor. Reforestation programs can be a good source of income, food, fuel, and assets for future use by the poor. Social workers, however, are not well represented in both governmental and non-governmental organizations that are engaged in the development and implementation of these policies and programs.

Social work educational institutions in developing countries must provide leadership in preparing graduate students who are able to visualize and understand the complex relationships between land, resources, subsistence living and poverty. Social workers should have substantive preparation in rural development. Figure 1 summarizes some of the problems in rural development, addressing the strengths and weaknesses of social workers in these issues and the role of social work educational institutions in better preparing these professionals.

Problems listed in Figure 1 are interlinked, but for the sake of convenience I address them one at a time. First, lack of community trust is a problem in implementing rural development programs. Often local people, especially the very poor, do not trust government officials or development experts. Establishing rapport and gaining trust is crucial to understanding local needs, and designing and implementing need based programs. Community social workers know how to establish rapport and gain trust from members of a community. Social work institutions can strengthen skills required to gain community trust by familiarizing students with experiences from various rural development programs.

Second, community participation helps create an inclusive environment and amplifies people's sense of ownership of development activities, commitment and willingness to bear responsibilities for failure or success. Community members should

Figure 1

Major problems in rural development, the strengths and weaknesses of social workers, and the role of educational institutions

| Problems in rural development | Strengths and weaknesses of social workers in development | Role of social work institutions |
|--|---|---|
| Lack of community trust. | Have skills to gain community trust. | Need to provide skills to gain community trust under various development contexts. |
| Lack of community participation (Drijver, 1991; Kottak, 1985; Oakley, 1991; Uphoff, 1985; Utting, 1994). | Have skills to gain community participation. | Need to provide skills to gain community participation and empowerment in different community development contexts. |
| Lack of institution strengthening/building (Kottak, 1985; Utting, 1994). | Have some skills to strengthen/build community institutions. | Need to provide skills to strengthen/build institutions in different settings. |
| Lack of understanding of community conflicts. | Have limited understanding of root causes of community conflicts. | Need to provide skills to understand root causes of community conflicts and to resolve them. |
| Lack of design and implementation of need based programs (Noronha & Spears, 1985; Utting, 1994). | Have limited knowledge of program planning, design, implementation and evaluation skills. | Must provide adequate skills required to conduct needs assessment and analysis, monitor programs, and assess intended and unintended program impacts. |

participate in every stage of program development, implementation and monitoring. Community social workers have skills to gain community participation. Their skills can be improved by

exposing them to various forms of participation in community forestry programs and by showing them how the community participation process itself can contribute to community empowerment (Drijver, 1991; Oakley, 1991).

Third, lack of understanding of local formal and informal institutions are problems in rural development. Local formal and informal institutions help pattern certain behavior and role expectations. It is important to understand local institutions to design and implement projects that are in harmony with local expectations, to strengthen institutions that are progressive in nature and to help develop new institutions using existing knowledge.

Fourth, lack of understanding of root causes of community conflicts is a major problem in rural development, especially in community forestry. Community conflicts are common especially regarding forest resources, because they are usually held as common pool resources in community or publicly owned land. The question of who is allowed to collect what, when and how much is either determined enforced by the forest department or by local governing institutions. Conflicts arise when sections of a community feel deprived of equal access to community forest resources.

Finally, lack of design and implementation of need-based programs is a major problem in rural development. Development programs based on national level statistics may not reflect local needs. Community social workers have very limited knowledge of the skills required to assess and analyze local needs, monitor programs and assess the intended and unintended impacts of these programs. Social work educational institutions must provide adequate program planning and evaluation skills to their graduates.

Social work education institutions in the industrialized countries of the west also should increase their attention to rural development. Even though the United States trains a small number of social work students per year from the developing countries, these graduates play an important role in promoting social work education in their home countries. Currently, in the United States, social workers are not adequately prepared to understand the context in which problems and issues related to rural development arise and the conditions under which they have to be addressed.

Often rural development content is limited to international social work courses. This should be changed. Some of the innovative experiences of rural development in developing countries may have implications for practice in the Western industrialized countries. For instance, many industrialized countries have begun to question their capacity to sustain and continue support of many of their income transfer systems and are looking for alternative approaches to alleviating poverty. Social workers around the world have the potential to identify and transfer socially and culturally appropriate innovative ideas across countries.

Students who are trained to deal with the problems of a developing country will be able to deal with equally complex problems faced by the very poor in urban and rural areas of Western industrialized societies such as the United States. For example, there is evidence in the developing countries that poor people organize around community resources (e.g., community forests) and collectively manage these lands to protect themselves from future forest resource vulnerability (Pandey & Yadama, 1990).

Various conditions that promote collective action among poor populations in developing countries may have implications for strengthening institutions in the inner cities of the United States. Similarly, even the very poor farmers in developing countries such as India or Nepal save and build assets for future use in various forms (e.g., jewelry, grain, trees, and land). An understanding of conditions that promote saving among the very poor in developing countries might have implications for encouraging saving among the poor in the United States.

Because social work is a contextual profession (Hokenstad, Khinduka & Midgley, 1992), we can strengthen social work graduates' ability to practice development at the local, national and international levels by providing them with contextual information throughout the curriculum. Schools of social work in the United States should enable students who are interested in international development to find international settings for their advanced practicum. This will benefit American social work students interested in international development and international students studying social work in American universities.

As social workers committed to alleviating poverty, we need to focus increasingly on a wide range of issues of social and

economic development, going well beyond the narrow definitions of current social work. The challenge before us is to tackle poverty from many directions. Social workers can be effective in promoting development if social work educational institutions challenge the students to identify linkages among problems that have diverse origins and design social and economic development programs that address these problems.

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