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DYNAMISM OF AGRICULTURAL SYSTEMS AND RURAL
COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH ASIA: FROM VULNERABILITY TO
SUSTAINABILITY

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This mini-symposium dealt with the issues of incentives, institutions, infrastructure and innovations (the 4Is) in South Asia by looking at the dynamism of agricultural systems and rural communities. It dealt with some of the main constraints of the region (inaccessibility, fragility, marginality and vulnerability) and their consequences for resource management, the sustenance of communities and the betterment of the environment. There were eight brief presentations.

The first came from Pradeep Tulachan (India) who considered trends in three integral components of mountain farming in South Asia (production of food-grain crops, horticulture and livestock) using official time-series data. It was suggested that productivity of resource use has declined in spite of increases in production. The latter is obviously welcome but there must be concern about productivity effects, which clearly need further examinations at the micro level. An interesting view was then advanced by Ganesh Rauniyar (New Zealand), who examined social, economic and biophysical indicators of community sustainability. Indicators from development agencies and NGOs were reviewed and their relevance was analysed. Case studies were taken from rural community development projects, mainly in Nepal and Bangladesh. It was suggested that action-oriented plans that are designed 'with the people' and not 'for the people' are more effective in terms of sustainability and effectiveness.

The third speaker, Punya P. Regmi (Thailand), looked at an eco-restructuring approach to reconcile mountain farming systems, using evidence from the mid-west region of Nepal. The opinion expressed was that neither technological change nor improvement in infrastructure would be able to overcome the problems of inequality between the vast number of subsistence farmers, unable to meet their calorie requirements, and the few large farmers with huge surpluses. Thus access to resources to earn sufficient income, at least to fulfil basic minimum needs, is an important issue of mountain agriculture in Nepal.

Takashi Takahatake (Japan) also looked at Nepal, describing developments in the Ilam District, in the east of the country, currently undergoing a transformation from subsistence to cash crop farming. Cash crops, which enhance vegetation coverage, were said to be useful since they can provide farm income

while stemming the tide of environmental degradation in the hill regions. This paper supplemented the findings of the previous one, suggesting the need for (and the possibility of) cash generation from farming, simultaneously using marginal and vulnerable lands in an environmentally friendly way. The main questions centred on the difficulties in replicating what has been happening in the Ilam District in other areas.

As the fifth presenter, Keshav L. Maharjan (Japan) described various local institutions for resource management and food procurement in rural communities of Nepal. The speaker stressed the geographical difficulties of the country, noting that its subsistence farming also faces population pressure. Some spontaneously formed local institutions, the so-called 'civil society organizations', which rest on traditional values and social norms, and are based on joint ownership and joint accountability, are developing versatile programmes to suit the needs of the people. Their performance in poverty alleviation seemed more effective than that of institutions formed exogenously for the sake of development intervention alone.

Following on, Yuba Raj Bhusal (Nepal) and Keshav L. Maharjan (Japan), assessed the institutional mechanism for rural poverty reduction in Nepal. The focus of the discussion was concerned with the funding of development projects by the central government in line with the recent commencement of the Local Self-Governance Act. The paper considered the design of a 'common basket', to enable the scattered and sometimes very nominal resources (public, private and civil societal) to be accumulated to allow poverty alleviation projects to be executed according to the needs and preferences of local people.

In the seventh contribution, Akinobu Kawai (Japan) turned to Bangladesh, specifically to the pattern of settlements in the deltaic plains. It discussed development efforts that never actually reach the people owing to the wide gap between the development administration centres and the village community. The final presentation, from Rie Ono (Japan), examined 'credit for the poor' in the rural development of Bangladesh and highlighted its limitations. Evidence was provided of how micro-credit programmes, generally regarded as one of the most effective tools for poverty alleviation, may not attain their objectives in the long run when they fail to consider the totality of needs of the people and bypass local social networks.