

Ponna Wignaraja. *Women, Poverty, and Resources.* New Delhi Newbury/London: Sage Publications. 1990. 242 pp.

Poverty alleviation with reference to gender has been the focus of attention of national and international organizations since the seventies. Massive international assistance, both financial and technical, has been given for such programmes. However, the success rate of such projects has been fairly low. Two major reasons can be given for this low rate of success: (i) the projects have been imposed from the top without due regard to the local conditions, and the target group, i.e., the women, have been treated as objects rather than subjects; (ii) the donors and the implementing agencies have not always focused on the ultimate goal of sustainable development. The success stories are quoted quite extensively but they have not been followed. The underlying factor behind their success was a strong faith in the capabilities of the masses at the grassroots level and the maximum use of local talent and expertise.

Ponna Wignaraja has produced a wealth of information by providing an in-depth review of the successful poverty alleviation projects amongst women which can lead to sustainable development in South Asia. He first analyses the successful cases in detail, and then he looks at the not very successful projects in Africa and Latin America, suggesting guidelines from specific successful projects in South Asia.

The book is systematically organized into seven chapters. The first chapter provides the background of the study. The conventional development strategy is discussed for five South Asian countries, highlighting the adverse impact of this strategy on the poverty alleviation programmes. The second chapter describes some very successful projects aimed at poverty alleviation among poor women in South Asia. The major feature of all these projects is that they concentrated on the abilities of the target groups and treated them as subjects rather than as objects. The projects were all initiated at the micro level and gradually spread out to interrelated issues. Over time, these projects led to sustainable development for the communities involved, and the special beneficiaries were very poor women.

Wignaraja devotes an extensive chapter to highlighting the lessons learnt from these projects. The systematic and explicit section on lessons learnt from the South Asian projects is a very comprehensive summary for the general reader. Those who have ever been involved in any such development effort cannot help agreeing to everything said; yet they would have a lot to learn from these lessons. This section enumerates all the factors underlying the success of the projects and emphasizes the divergence of the strategies adopted from the conventional approaches. This issue is dealt with convincingly.

From the lessons learnt from the experience of South Asian countries, he puts forward the concept of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as the most important factor underlying successful projects. The involvement of the target group, the use of talent and expertise of the local people, and guidance by the committed academics or

social workers are the major ingredients of the PAR approach.

Similarly, the author explains why and how these micro oriented projects should be evaluated differently from the conventional evaluation approaches.

The last two chapters are devoted to the role of international donors. The author first describes the existing faulty patterns of international aid inflow for poverty alleviation projects. He then highlights the role played by different donor agencies in the South Asian projects. The role of donors in these projects has been significantly different from the conventional role. Instead of only paying for the projects through the local governments, these donor agencies have been in touch with the implementing agencies, which were largely NGOs and had familiarized themselves with the target groups. This approach provided much flexibility to the development efforts for poor women. The donor agencies were able to influence the local governments on the appropriation of funds, keeping in view the needs of the target groups as well as the concerns of the NGOs for these target groups.

Building on the working and experience of these donor agencies, the author lays out detailed but simplified lines of guidance for the donors to follow if they want to have concrete results from such projects. The crucial aspect of the guidelines is close collaboration between different agencies funding interrelated projects. The author explains the point by emphasizing the overlapping of activities between projects funded by the UNICEF and the IFAD. If these agencies blend their objectives, have close collaboration between the staff of the two agencies, and the staff members are in close touch with the implementers and the target groups, the success rate of the projects towards sustainable development will be very high and the costs will be significantly lower. Furthermore, the sensitization of donors to the real issue will help ease sensitization of the national/local government officials, which is most essential.

Overall, keeping in view the clarity of presentation of the most complicated and interlinked issues involved in the gender-sensitive approach to poverty alleviation and sustainable development, this book should be compulsory reading for all parties involved in the field of development for women.

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