

Harvesting Opportunities: Rural Development in the 21st Century

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IV Regional Thematic Forum

Opening remarks

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San José, Costa Rica, October 19-21, 2004

1. Greetings to all present, acknowledgements to locals, etc.
2. Purpose of this event (or Why we are here):
 - Exchange among diverse actors on themes of common interest
 - Mutual learning and understanding of different perspectives
 - Dialogue among actors that do not often sit at the same table
 - Listen and learn more about individual cases and countries so we can personalize the dialogue
 - Develop relationships with diverse partners
 - Explore new dimensions and possibilities for our work
3. Why rural development?

Background

The image of farmers on wide and scattered lands isolated from the rest of the country and the rest of the world no longer paints a full picture of the rural landscape. From geography, to culture, to economy, the diversity of rural life demands an informed discernment of what is rural and how to define its development.

A few commonalities remain that identify rurality—the influence and impact of nature on life, a dispersed population and the limited access to services and resources. Yet each of these concepts can only be defined in very relative terms. It means many things to many people. In this context, development seeks to use, protect and enhance the natural, physical and human resources needed to make long-term improvements in rural life from offering opportunities for employment and income generation, to preserving cultural traditions to protecting the natural environment.

Changes in Rural Life

Rural life is being transformed by the world around it. Urbanization, industrialization and globalization are making their ways to these remote areas. The complex fusion of these national, regional and international forces has generated a variety of paradoxes. The freedom of movement within and beyond borders has left less than a quarter of Latin Americans living in rural areas. Greater opportunities for education, employment and services, have drawn people to cities.

At the same time, rural jobs are changing. Rural non-agricultural income, especially in employment in the service

industry, continues to grow, now accounting for 40 percent of rural incomes. Yet although agriculture contributes to only 10 percent of GDP in the Latin America Region, a large share of the labor force, an average of nearly 60 percent in Central America, works in the agricultural sector.

Rural Poverty and Inequality

In the midst of these contrasting images, some legacies unfortunately have remained. Despite being the region with the fastest rates of urbanization in the world, poverty in Latin America, particularly extreme poverty, remains largely a rural phenomenon. Nearly 78 million rural inhabitants in Latin America live in poverty, accounting for 62 percent of the poor in the region. Latin America also maintains its notoriety as the region with the highest levels of inequality in the world. And rural areas maintain great disparities in the access and quality of water and sanitation, electricity, health and education.

Ethnicity also plays a role in rural inequality. In the face of persistent discrimination, indigenous people often continue to experience higher rates of poverty, lower wages and lower levels of education than others.

Latin America is also a region well endowed with natural resources, with more than half of the world's tropical forests, major biodiversity reserves and around one-third of the world's fresh water. Much of these resources are concentrated in rural areas. But we are losing these resources at a record rate. Both the benefits and the damages to the environment will be felt not only at the local, but also at the national and global levels.

The Contribution to National Development

The impact of the rural, with its sizeable population, poverty and resources, bears heavily on the pursuit of national development. The juxtaposition of external conditions requiring change and domestic demands to respond to the historical strains on rural areas are driving the search for new approaches to promote rural development.

The challenge now is to determine which strategies can balance all interests and reflect the priorities to promote rural development as part of an integral approach to national development. The weaknesses of past top-down policies for rural development have stimulated a new vision towards inclusive, participatory decision-making in the context of a growingly decentralized region. The long-standing questions of whether agriculture serves as the avenue towards economic development, or whether rurality will be transformed into a new industrial or even a service economy remain issues of intense debate.

Given these facts, how can economic and social opportunities be promoted in rural areas to reduce poverty and inequality, while stimulating economic growth and environmental and social protection?

Our Role as Participants of this Forum

We come to you, experts in your own right, as rural activists, entrepreneurs, policy makers and academics, to respond to these questions, to share your experiences and offer new strategies towards the transformation of rural life in pursuit of greater equity and opportunities for social, economic and cultural growth. This forum is an opportunity to expand our understanding of rural development beyond our own areas of expertise and experiences. It is also an opportunity to build the networks these immense challenges require among the different sectors, which will produce an enhanced collaboration.

Thank you.