

Webinar Proceedings

No. 2

Development with Participation: Towards a More Just and Prosperous Rural Economy

Webinar Series on the Socio-Economic Impact of the Covid Pandemic



BAHÁ'Í CHAIR
FOR STUDIES IN
DEVELOPMENT

DEVI AHILYA VISHWAVEDYALAYA

Development with Participation: Towards a
More Just and Prosperous Rural Economy

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In response to the Covid 19 pandemic, the Chair has organized a series of webinars on the social and economic impact of the pandemic on India's most vulnerable and marginalized populations in rural and urban areas. These webinars bring together some of India's best-known social scientists and development practitioners to share insights on the challenges facing these vulnerable groups and the steps that can be taken at the level of policy making and practice to address these challenges.

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Contents

1. Profile of the Speakers.....	1
2. Background Note.....	3
3. Webinar Proceedings.....	7
4. Photographic Archive.....	19



Profile of the Speakers

Dr. Ravi Srivastava who is Professor and Director, Centre for Employment Studies, Institute for Human Development at New Delhi and Chairman of the Institute of Development Studies at Jaipur. He is a former Professor of Economics and Chairperson, Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and a full-time Member of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS). He has published numerous books and monographs and more than one hundred papers in national and international journals.

Mr. Devinder Sharma is a distinguished food and trade policy analyst. He is trained as an agricultural scientist and has been an award winning journalist. He has been awarded with the honorary degree of Professor-at-Large by the CSK Himachal Pradesh Agricultural University, Palampur. He is also a Visiting Professor to the Sardar Patel University of Police, Security and Criminal Justice; and has formerly been a Visiting Fellow to the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), in the Philippines; Visiting Fellow at the School of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia, Norwich (UK); and a Visiting Fellow at the University of Cambridge (UK).

Dr. Janak Palta McGilligan is the founder-director of Jimmy McGilligan Centre for Sustainable Development, Indore and the former Founder-Director of Barli Development Institute for Rural Women, Indore. She was awarded with the Padma Shree award by the government of India in 2015 in recognition of her nearly four decades of work in the field of development especially among the tribal women in the state of Madhya Pradesh and more recently for sustainable community development.

Dr. Vesall Nourani holds a PhD in Economics from Cornell University and is a post-doctoral fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His research asks "what is the (changing) role of communities in local economic systems?" The empirical focus of his research to date has been sub-Saharan village economies where he tries to develop an increasingly nuanced and sound understanding of the role of social relationships, social norms, and local knowledge systems in the economic lives of predominantly farming households.



Background Note

The nearly 80 million migrants who returned from cities to rural areas in the wake of the Covid pandemic brought into sharp focus the crisis facing the rural economy in India. The immediate question was how would these millions of workers be provided employment in rural areas. The deeper question was that in a resource rich country such as India with its civilizational roots in villages, did the path to development for rural peoples necessitate the migration of such large numbers to cities? Once the intensity of the present crisis subsides, is the only option before policy makers to re-implement the same policies that created the conditions that caused such massive rural to urban migration? Or is it possible to conceive of an alternative path to development that draws from the rich set of resources that the rural inhabitants themselves have to offer?

The standard economic prescription for reducing distress migration from rural to urban areas is for the rural economy to achieve high levels of growth which will provide greater employment opportunities and raise the income of rural households. For this to happen, economists suggest that agrarian distress be addressed and, more importantly, that there be sectoral diversification of the rural economy and the

promotion of non-agricultural economic activities in rural areas.

Yet, for economic development of the rural areas to genuinely contribute to enhanced wellbeing at the individual and collective level, technical prescriptions will need to be located within the broader vision of pursuing social and economic justice. While economic growth is vital, experience has shown that if policies that promote it are not guided by the compass of justice, they can replicate entrenched patterns of exploitation and dependency that lead to the fruits of rural prosperity being disproportionately garnered by a new or existing elite. Similarly, as rural economies modernize, considerations of justice would demand that the rural people have a say in the kind of society that is being built. A conscious citizenry would be vigilant that the process of modernization does not bring to the rural areas some of the excesses of unplanned urbanization such as the pollution of the environment, the erosion of cultural heritage, the breakdown of social bonds, the sense of anomie and extreme economic disparities.

Policy makers have indicated that in addition to social protection, rural people need training and capacity building to provide human resources for an increasingly diversified economy. However, while the gaining of scientific knowledge, technical know-how and skill development is necessary, the existing knowledge base in rural communities and positive elements in the spiritual, social and cultural values of the people can be valuable contributions to the

development process that must not be ignored. In fact, one of the strengths of rural communities is their diversity. Each community has a rich agro-ecology, knowledge-base, history, tradition and value system that can generate diverse bases for social progress.

Indeed, some of the most innovative and ecologically sustainable development programs in India over the past few decades have been those that have recognized the knowledge, values and capacities of rural people and creatively drawn upon them in the development process. Examples include the Kudumbashree movement in Kerala which taps into pre-existing bonds of solidarity among marginalized women to create programs for sustainable collective farming and the Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) movement that draws upon indigenous knowledge systems of people and their spiritual convictions to find an ecologically sound and affordable alternative to the corporate-led agro-business model of agriculture.

This webinar seeks to open a conceptual space for the sharing of theoretically and empirically grounded insights that show a way forward towards a more just and inclusive form of rural development where economic growth is in sync with the objectives of social development and environmental sustainability. It seeks to explore how the thinking that informs policy and practice related to strengthening rural economies will need to take into account the capacities and potential of rural people to be protagonists in the process of just, inclusive and sustainable development.



Webinar Proceedings

The Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development, Devi Ahilya University organised a webinar on August 8, 2020 titled, 'Development with Participation: Towards a More Just and Prosperous Rural Economy'. This was the second in a series of webinars organized by the Chair exploring the social and economic impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on India's most vulnerable populations. The aim of this webinar was to open a conceptual space for the sharing of insights on the way forward for a more just and inclusive rural development where economic development is pursued as a means to a united and equitable society. It sought to explore how the thinking that informs policy and practice related to strengthening rural economies will need to take into account the capacities and potential of rural people to be protagonists in pursuing just, inclusive and sustainable development.

The panellists who spoke on the theme were Dr. Ravi Srivastava, an Economist from the Institute for Human Development in Delhi; Mr. Devinder Sharma, an Agricultural Scientist and Food Policy Analyst; Dr. Janak Palta McGilligan, a veteran social worker with nearly four decades of experience working for the upliftment of rural women and Dr. Vesall Nourani, a

Post-Doctoral Fellow in Economics from Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States who is presently carrying out research on empowerment of rural communities in Uganda.

The panellists deliberated on the need for a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the reality of rural areas in India and the rural urban interface; the need to strengthen institutions of local governance and the local economy; the possibilities for achieving a more participatory and just form of rural development by building the scientific, entrepreneurial and creative capacities of those involved in agriculture; the necessity of focusing on the empowerment of rural women as the first agents of change and the imperative to create technologies based on the priorities and values of rural people to achieve the kind of growth that is most relevant to them.

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Dr. Ravi Srivastava began the discussion by emphasizing the need for a more nuanced understanding of the concept of the ‘rural’ in the context of contemporary India. According to him, the sharp separation that is conceptually drawn between rural and urban is being increasingly blurred in India by rural areas and populations acquiring urban characteristics while urban centres are constantly expanding in rural regions. This complex reality in India, he felt, can best be understood in terms of a rural-urban continuum. Yet, while spatially there is a blurring of boundaries, the distinction between rural

and urban is quite marked when it comes to labour productivity and standard of living, with the urban worker producing 2.8 times more than his rural counterpart and enjoying a better standard of living. This disparity, he explained, is not accidental but rather a direct result of the implementation of exploitative policies where resources are drawn from rural sectors to build the industrial base of a capitalist society.

Further Dr. Srivastava explained that rural areas must not be viewed as autonomous units. They are closely interlinked with the urban economy. They also are not homogenous, with class, caste and patriarchal structures of dominance determining differentiation in rural society. According to him, understanding these structures of dominance are vital for addressing questions of participation and justice in rural societies. Increasing income and wealth in rural areas without addressing these structural causes of inequality can be counterproductive since it has been shown that wealth from agricultural and non-agricultural sources can exacerbate and reinforce these forms of dominance.

Dr. Srivastava identified three areas that would need to be addressed for strengthening rural economies. The first was the need to strengthen local governance. He explained that the local governance as it exists in India – the three-tier Panchayati raj system in villages and municipal administration in cities – are not empowered enough with funds and executive powers not being devolved to them which limits their capacity to govern effectively. He observed that the process

has been further undermined by the prevalence of patriarchal dominance in the structure of rural society. Without strengthening structures of local governance, it would be difficult to stimulate the sense of agency within the local population. An example of the way effective governance can stimulate local economic development was shared with the case of the Kudumbashree system in Kerala where poor women in self-help groups engage in collective development efforts such as community farming, entrepreneurship training programs and other such activities assisted by the state government.

Another area needing attention according to Dr. Srivastava was capacity building in the context of the local economy. He commented that the more localized the economy becomes the more local capacity is built. He added that in the current context, there is greater room for decentralized economic development and the emergence of strong local economies as the conventional scale economies have weakened. However, for a decentralized economy to be vibrant, there needs to be not just institutional and organizational capacity but also a well-connected system for accessing and transmitting information which local producers—both farmers and non-farmers—can benefit from.

The third area that he felt required attention was the need for rural planning to be done within the context of an integrated rural-urban and regional planning framework. Such an integrated rural-urban framework would encompass both measures to foster inclusive

urbanization as well as strengthening of physical and social infrastructure in rural areas.

In terms of a strategy for bringing about enduring change Dr. Srivastava felt that this required civil society organizations and the state to work together in tandem. The policies created by the state are more likely to be effective when they are in sync with grassroots efforts undertaken by civil society organizations which create the necessary demand for change.

Mr. Devinder Sharma, a noted food and policy analyst, was the second speaker of the day. In his remarks, he mentioned that the neglect of the agricultural sector in the development policies over the decades has created the conditions leading to the migration of millions from rural areas to cities. Mr. Sharma felt that the weakening of the agricultural sector in India is an outcome of inappropriate development policies. Although agriculture provides livelihoods to nearly half of the country's people, it has been neglected and provided minimal incentives when compared with the stimulus provided to the manufacturing or the service sectors. He suggested that if agriculture received the same kind of stimulus, there would have been much more equitable, balanced and inclusive growth in the economy. At present, the model of agriculture being pushed forward is burdening farmers with growing debts since they have to buy seeds and fertilizers and they are often paid less than the minimum price for their produce. Further, he felt that there is the need to correct the assumption that small scale agriculture is

an unproductive sector. The deep-seated bias against farmers, according to Mr. Sharma, was reflected in the discourse of policy makers. “Minimum Support Prices (MSP) paid to farmers,” he mentioned, “is labelled a subsidy and is seen to be increasing fiscal deficit whereas financial support to multinational corporations is called an incentive for growth”.

Questioning the equation of urbanization with development, he felt that such a model of collective living based on agglomeration where 70 percent of the population would live in 2 percent of the country’s land mass is not suitable for India. Instead, India needed to develop its vast rural economy by investing in agriculture, increasing the income provided to farmers through government schemes, and encouraging local talent and entrepreneurship in rural areas to find effective, indigenous and environmentally-sound solutions to the challenges. He gave the example of one such self-reliant, locally-developed agroecological model implemented in Andhra Pradesh called the Andhra Pradesh ‘Zero-Budget’ Natural Farming programme. This program which has reached nearly 6 lakh farmers of the state in the last 10 years is a community-managed, government-supported effort that has significantly reduced input costs for farmers by getting them to switch to non-chemical agriculture.

On the subject of enhancing participation of rural people in the development process, Dr. Janak McGilligan, a renowned social worker who was awarded the Padma Shree in recognition of her work

for the upliftment of tribal women, pointed out that in relation to rural development there has been an undue emphasis on building physical infrastructure and not enough attention given to raising the capacity of local people to meaningfully participate in the planning, evaluation, and implementation of development programs that affect their lives. This lack of a rural corps of well-educated and trained human resources has led to the exploitation of rural people and widening of the wealth gap between rural and urban areas.

In this context, Dr. McGilligan focused her comments particularly on the need to empower rural women. She mentioned that despite the discrimination they face, women have an irreplaceable contribution to make in building strong and vibrant local economies because of their unique, multifaceted role in both running the household and earning a livelihood. At home, women provide stability to the family and they are the first educators of the children. In terms of contributing to the family income, women carry out various kinds of remunerative work alongside their domestic responsibilities. Sharing her learning from her over four decades of development work, she said that she and her colleagues had learned that the strategy to building a strong village lay in empowering its women because they are the most effective change makers. Although the government and development agencies around the world have recognized the importance of empowering women for achieving sustainable development goals, Dr. McGilligan felt that there is much more that needs to be done on this front.

Emphasizing the importance of moral and spiritual education in the process of capacity building, Dr. McGilligan referred to her experience with the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women. The organization conducted the educational programs for rural women not just in literacy, vocational skills and knowledge in areas such as health and environment but it also made students conscious of their social responsibility to use their inherent capacities to build more just, united and prosperous communities in their villages. This spiritual commitment that the women developed to serving their communities ensured that over four decades none of the graduates of the institute migrated to cities for work and, according to her, nearly 46 percent of these women earn their own living. In addition to this, these women have improved the infant and child mortality of the community and changed certain prevalent undesirable attitudes and perceptions in their families and communities.

Dr. Vesall Nourani's presentation raised important questions about the implications of participation of the rural people in the knowledge systems that guide and propel development. Discussing how the objectives and values of those experts who apply science and technology in a field such as agriculture has an immense influence on the field, he quoted an illustrative example of the modernization of agriculture in the United States provided by Prof. Deborah Fitzgerald. Quoting from Prof. Fitzgerald, he mentioned that when experts were faced with the question of how to modernize agriculture in the US

with the application of technology, they encountered a great diversity of ways in which agriculture was practiced. Faced with such a multiplicity of methods and approaches, they looked for common problems in agriculture to which uniform technological solutions could be provided. This had a great role to play in the homogenization of the field. This logic of the homogenization of production systems, according to Dr. Nourani, was something many rural areas of the world experienced in the process of modernization. It was imposed by the specific logic of the experts who developed these sciences and technologies. “They had a particular motive which was to make farming sciences manageable and increase capital inflow into the agricultural sector of the economy”, he said. He mentioned that technology transforms society according to the values and priorities of those who create it. The question that he raised was how to ensure that the values and priorities of rural populations determine the way science and technology is developed and used in rural settings? In this regard, he felt that the crisis caused by the pandemic could be an opportunity for change since the existing paradigm for development was now severely under question.

Dr. Nourani discussed his research work in Uganda involving the use of an educational curriculum that seeks to build the scientific capacity of the people to find scientific or technological solutions that are relevant to their experience. Applying the scientific concepts and methods they learn, he mentioned, students are able to learn how to increase productivity in a manner that is environmentally sound. In one

initiative that he described, young people in Uganda were able to apply scientific methods to some of their developmental problems in two villages. In the first, using scientific methods they analyzed with greater accuracy the public health needs of their community and the incidence of Covid 19 among the villagers. In another case they initiated a study among households in another village on the benefits of crop diversification.

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There is no doubt that India's movement towards prosperity requires the development of its vast rural areas. What the webinar made clear is that the path of that development is neither through the romantic retreat to the past with the idealization of village republics and the glorification of the traditional way of life nor is it through the uncritical surrender to the global forces that seek to transform rural areas through processes of modernization into replicas of urban centres of the global North. The transformation of India's rural areas towards a just and prosperous future will have to be guided by its inhabitants by drawing upon the resources of science and technology as well as the spiritual principles of religion and their own indigenous systems. The wisdom to bring together these various knowledge systems harmoniously in paving the path for development will have to be forged by the process of education and through engagement in the process of development itself. Thoughtful participation in the development process is thus the crucible from which the learning

and capacity needed to advance will be generated. The implication of this for policy is that there is a vital need to invest in strengthening the education system and institutions for research at the grassroots as well as those institutional mechanisms that would foster meaningful and substantive local participation in the development process.



Clockwise from left to right: Dr. Arash Fazli, Mr. Devinder Sharma, Prof. Ravi Srivastava, Dr. Vesall Nourani and Dr. Janak Palta McGilligan

PARTICIPATION IN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

- One (of many) dimension to this logic involves participation in knowledge systems.
 - Science and technology are twin forces in the path of development.
 - Whose values and priorities drive the development of science and technology?
 - What riches and gems might we find if rural populations are equipped with the capabilities that enable processes of discovery?

Dr. Vesall Nourani giving a presentation titled 'Questions and Reflections Towards Just and Prosperous Rural Economies'



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