

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND LAND REFORM *

In Iran as elsewhere in the world experience has shown that the agricultural sector grows slower than the sector of industry and services and this lag is, to a larger extent, due to the social backwardness and lack of adequate dynamism on the part of rural communities.

By endeavouring to find out and analyze defects and shortcomings in the social life of farmers, to devise ways of overcoming these defects and to induce the rural inhabitants to self-help as a means to a better life, community development organizations can be instrumental in speeding up the pace of economic growth in under-developed areas. The objective of the community development programmes is, in fact, to make full use of the most important source of production that is the manpower. After the implementation of land reform, this objective assumes a new character, because under the landlord-peasant system, landlords for selfish reasons are not interested in the intellectual advancement of their rural community.

With elimination of the landlord, however, two new problems crop up: Firstly, setting up a substitute institution to take care of the management of the village and the continuity of the chain of production hitherto performed by the landlord or his deputy, and secondly, educating the farmers and making enlightened and self-confident individuals out of them. One of the earliest steps should therefore be to create and develop local organizations dealing with rural life. In this study we are going to examine how far, the Iranian Community Development programme has been successful in its task.

It was in 1937 that for the first time an organization in the name of Development and Reform Department was established in this country for the purpose of effecting social and development programmes in rural areas. But in actual practice this organization failed to achieve anything substantial on

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the village level. According to a law passed in 1952 ten per cent was to be deducted from the Landlord's share and set aside as a sort of cooperative and development funds to be used under the supervision of local councils for building of public premises like schools, water reservoirs, mosques etc. This was called «development share» .

By 1953 there existed a total of 30,757 village councils all over the country and already the movement for communal activity and social progress was underway. The law enacted in 1956 provided for the reduction of the so-called development share was reduced to five per cent. In the same year certain foreign institutions, like the Near East Foundation and subsequently in 1959 the Ford Foundation came forward for technical cooperation with the Iranian Community Development Organization in the implementation of experimental projects in various parts of the country including one in the Gorgan plain. In 1961 and 1962 the Community Development Law was prolonged but by then the assistance of the US Operations Mission to these projects had ceased completely.

In 1963 the Council of Ministers decreed the formation of a new organization under the name of the Department of Social Affairs and Development of Villages to substitute the previous Rural Development Organization. The new department which was well equipped with personnel and adequate authority began with dividing the country into four zones. A supervisor was assigned for every zone. For the purpose of efficiency and facilitating the exchange of view at all levels, a decentralized system was designed whereby local councils were set up at the level of rural districts, townships, governorates general and province. The council was usually composed of local heads of agriculture, roads, education, and health departments and the branch chief of the Agricultural Credits and Rural Development Bank, and a representative of the Union of Cooperative Societies and was presided over by the local governor. The representative of the Department of Social Affairs and Development of Villages (DSADV) who acted as the secretary of the development council of every rural district would submit quarterly report of the activities of his area of jurisdiction to provincial branch of DSADV.

The law also provided that for every village with a population of at least 250 a five-man council should be elected by secret ballot and for a period of three years.

Among the functions of the village councils the following are the most important :

Active collaboration with the board of management of cooperative societies in the performance of the latter's work ; promoting the creation of public utilities like electricity, drinking water supply, bath houses and so on; establishment of schools and vocational training centres as well as health facilities; building of roads, mosques, slaughter houses and so forth and finally cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture officials in activities that concern the village as a whole like plant pest control and tree plantation.

By mid - March 1964 a total of 2142 village councils had been set up all over the country covering 4.4 per cent of all Iranian villages. But they were not uniformly distributed in various provinces: Gilan with 484 councils ranked the highest while Charmahal Bakhtiari and Shahrekurd with only two councils ranked the lowest.

In accordance with the Law which provided for the formation of village councils, an organisation known as the Department of Social Affairs and Development was to be established at various administrative divisions of the country starting from provinces and going down to cities, townships and rural districts. In addition to its own duty a department at any level exercised supervision over the lower one and was, in turn, supervised by the upper one in the administrative hierarchy.

On the village level we have an individual called « *dehyar* » or village assistant, his main function being to prepare the ground in the village for the implementation of community development project including the operations of extension agents. At first, the *dehyar* used to contact the villagers directly, but in the new set - up he performs his duty through the village council. At present there are 919 village assistants, 34 of whom are women. In places where *dehyar* has not been appointed, the village headman is expected to carry out functions of the former. Each village assistant has a minimum of six villages in his or her area of jurisdiction.

In our view defects and shortcomings of the Rural Development Organisation are as follow :

1. The law provides that village councils should be established only in

villages with a minimum of 250 inhabitants, and in this way some smaller population centres are deprived from having a council.

2. The law also provides that city governors may appoint representatives to take care of village council election, whereas it would have been more logical if this task had been assigned to community development officials who are more familiar with the rural situation, know local notables and informed individuals and therefore they are in a better position to arrange a fair election.

3. If we want to assign a *dehyar* for every village with over 250 inhabitants we would need about 1500 *dehyar* and for all villages of the country more than 2000, whereas the law has banned new employment for this purpose. On the other hand the use of other government officials like literacy corpsmen instead of *dehyar* - that has been proposed in the law - is not feasible because these other officials have not the necessary training and background for the job.

4. The proposed functions of the village councils are too heavy and not at all commensurate with the number of personnel that have been provided by the Development Department.

5. The law provides that revenues collected by every village council should be spent for community development activities in the same area. While the 2 per cent development share of income from the villages in the North of Iran would be a considerable amount, in the case of villages in the South, which are mainly poor, the figure would be quite insignificant for the implementation of any major development plan. Thus, the law in practice will cause a disharmonious development in various regions of the country and will widen the gap already existing in the degree of progress amongst Iranian villages.

Another important defect is in the present organisational set-up of the Development Department. It is not provided with adequate funds nor is it equipped with sufficient competent staff, and those of the personnel who have specialized in their jobs do not show any enthusiasm because they are not

well paid or properly treated by other government agencies with whom they are concerned, and thus they feel they are neglected. Furthermore the department happens to be under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior whose main functions are not in the least connected with community development, and therefore adequate attention is not paid to this matter by the respective authorities.



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