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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 28(3) : 326-327

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741-28.3.326

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SDC Supports Rural Development to Address Climate Change and Food Security

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Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) recently decided that the Joint Donor Concept on Rural Development (JDCRD) elaborated by the members of the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development (GDPRD) should be used as the guiding strategic document for SDC investments in this area. This is important for SDC's activities, since much of SDC's rural development work is indeed in mountain areas, in classic mountain countries such as Bolivia, Nepal, and Tajikistan. This decision implies that SDC will refrain from formulating its own strategy, and it marks an important step in implementing the harmonization and alignment principles in the thematic work of the Paris Declaration. Why is this important and what kind of orientation does the JDCRD provide?

Agriculture and rural development: back on the international development agenda

First of all, many developing countries and donor agencies, after two decades of neglecting investments in agriculture and rural development (ARD), have realized that poverty alleviation is not feasible without reemphasizing rural development. Rapidly growing economies like India and China have come to this conclusion, just as Ghana, Niger, and Bolivia have. The *World Development Report 2008* provides a solid analytical foundation for their decision. Investments in agriculture and rural development are 4 times more pro-poor than investments in other sectors. Supporting the poor where they live and in the activities they master is the basic message. The JDCRD takes this up and provides the framework for donors to move jointly in supporting developing countries, especially in Africa, in implementing the political agenda. While most of the analytical work was initiated when many development specialists still doubted the relevance of ARD, the last two years have been marked by two phenomena that influenced public and expert opinion.

Food prices and assessment of climate change have lasting influence

The first is the sudden rise in food prices and the serious political turmoil this created simultaneously in over 40 countries. The second is the publication of the report of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). It became clear that food, food shortages, and food prices are not only a problem of the poor and hungry but also crucial factors in political stability. And it also became obvious that climate change will make it increasingly difficult to protect vulnerable groups and countries from food shortages and to develop, with resource-poor farmers, resilient food systems that provide basic food security for farmers and allow them to contribute adequately to feeding the increasing number of urban poor—the most noble function of agriculture—and also to generate income. At the same time nature is sending powerful signals that it needs humans to rethink their approach to interacting with their environment. A growing number of extreme climate events, increasing shortages of clean freshwater resources, and the dramatic erosion of genetic resources are clear warning signals to the human species.

Mountain areas: showcases for modern rural development

Mountain areas provide perfect examples of the importance of seeing rural people not as the problem but as a potential to be used for their own development. Mountain ecosystems are complex and demand a lot of experience for sustainable management. Mountain people often know better than anybody else what can happen when water is poorly managed in mountain areas. Disaster risk prevention in mountain areas in the light of climate change, without taking into account the knowledge of local people, has proved to be an ill-advised and costly strategy in many cases. In agriculture, the best innovations often stem from a combination of modern, science-based and traditional knowledge.

Rural people are the key to rural development

The Joint Donor Concept on Rural Development rightly puts rural populations at the center of meeting its own development challenges. The intellectual, cultural, and physical potential of these pop-

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ulations is indeed the most neglected development resource. Providing them with the services they need in terms of agricultural education, research, and extension, as well as with other basic services, could unveil an enormously rich potential for resolving most problems. There are many examples of this. When rural people are given a chance as a group, they seize it readily, often far more rapidly than most people expect.

Policy challenges for donors

However, in developing countries the institutions needed to further development based on local knowledge and sound external contributions have always been weak; they have become even weaker in the years during which agriculture and rural development were neglected in terms of development investments. In Africa, up to 40% of the researchers and extensionists now practicing will retire in the next 10–15 years. It is not clear who will replace them and in what types of institutions the new generation will work. Major efforts to rebuild and redesign institutions to support rural development are needed. Here lies one of the principal challenges for coordinated international support. It is unthinkable that an isolated bilateral initiative—much less one undertaken by a relatively small agency like SDC—would have the necessary financial means and the continuity required for substantial institutional reforms.

Moreover, the donor record on coordinated and aligned support to rural development is less than outstanding. Even in a country like Nicaragua, with a sector-wide multidonor program for ARD called PRORURAL, more than 40 bilateral missions were received by the Ministry of Agriculture in 2006 alone. This puts enormous pressure on the scarce leadership resources of the government, which are sorely lacking in terms of guiding national programs. In many countries, rural development is rightly considered one of the most fragmented sectors in terms of international support. In many countries, there are no bankable, harmonized, and aligned programs in rural development. This makes it difficult to increase investments. This is partly due to the wide range of public and private stakeholders in rural development, which is far greater than in sectors such as health or water and sanitation. Geographically, rural development is by definition dispersed over wide areas—another factor that creates difficulty in achieving good coordination. However, this is no justification for uncoordinated support. Rather, this situation is a challenge for donors to come to grips with these factors. This is why the JDCRD and the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development as an initiative are important in the international community.

For SDC, the JDCRD is now a reference document for the global issue program “Food Security,” to be launched by SDC in October 2008, and for the Agriculture and Rural Development network which manages the topic within SDC. It is a general policy of SDC to support rural development in a coordinated way, especially where a bankable national sector or sub-sector program exists. In Nicaragua, SDC is currently leading the donor group that provides support to PROFOR in the form of a basket fund. In Laos, joint support with other donors is being initiated, and in Africa support to enhance food security in Southern Africa is being given within the framework of SADC. Thousands of farmers are benefiting from drought-tolerant maize varieties and bean technologies developed by programs co-financed by SDC and other donors. Mountain areas continue to be an important focus. While mountain development as such is not a priority topic for SDC, climate change and increasing pressure on water resources may demand more attention to this topic in relation to different thematic areas such as water resources management and disaster risk reduction.

Yet the real challenge is to make rural development professions attractive once again for young, well-educated Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians. Without them, not much can be achieved.

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