

Sustainable Rural Development: 21st Century's Challenge for the Universities in Bangladesh

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Abstract : Having faced persistent poverty over a long period of time a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region have recently started changing their development strategy to cater to the need of the 21st century. One of the programmatic options that came about in rural development planning of some of these countries is to engage universities in rural/agricultural development research and project-implementation activities. The Agricultural University of Hebei in China, which has been providing direct services to rural communities for some years, is being seen as a pioneer of such initiative in the region. This paper was originally presented by the author in the UNESCO Regional Meeting on the "Role of Universities for Rural Development" in Beijing last September, which was participated by academics and practitioners to exchange ideas, experiences and new methodologies in rural development. In the context of rural poverty and an exploitative social structure, the author pushes forward the idea of "partnership" between formal governance (government and NGOs) and new actors (universities, research organisations, think tanks) for wider collaboration and intervention. Demonstrating the incompetence of Bangladesh universities to play such catalytic role, the paper suggests for a behavioural change in academic arena to play its part in combating widespread poverty and contribute to the development in the new millennium.

Background

In the Asia-Pacific region, over 60 percent of the population is rural (UNESCO, 1998). But technological development of the 20th century has already set the course of

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rural development for 21st century, in which, inevitably, the role of universities becomes pertinent. It is increasingly felt by different quarters that the universities, as the centre of higher learning and research activities, should supplement governmental/NGO efforts in providing practical services to rural communities apart from their usual commitment to provide education. A change in the role perception of universities has now become a demand of the time. Some universities in the region have already started ambitious rural development projects aiming to alleviate poverty through technological support, extension work and advice to farmers and other occupational groups of rural population. The Agricultural University of Hebei in Baoding, China, for example, has been playing a pioneering role in providing direct services to rural farmers of the province.

UNESCO Beijing Office, in collaboration with Chinese National commission for UNESCO and International research and Training Centre for Rural education (INRULED), organised a Regional Conference on the "Role of Universities for Rural Development" in Beijing between 14 and 17 September 1998. A total of 18 academics and experts in rural development, representing six countries of the Asia-Pacific region, namely Bangladesh (1), China (7), India (2), Indonesia (2), Malaysia (1), Pakistan (1), the Philippines (1) and Thailand (3), attended the meeting and presented papers. The participants also visited rural development schemes of Hebei university. The core objectives of the meeting was (a) to exchange and share successful and innovative ideas, experiences and methodologies in rural development; and (b) to draw up a course of action for the universities in the region to enable them to contribute to rural development.

In the conference, the author presented a paper entitled, "Role of Universities in Rural Development: The Case of Bangladesh". The paper highlighted the context of poverty in rural Bangladesh, the governmental and non-governmental intervention to alleviate poverty, limitations of the developmental interventions, role of public universities in development and the options for future. This paper is a broadened and retailored version of what was presented in the meeting. Keeping the basic argument of the original paper intact, the author substantiates his analysis as to show the incompetence of the universities in Bangladesh to face the challenges of the new millennium. Nonetheless, an integrated approach has been envisaged in the paper that shows a way out from what has been a sluggish 20th century for the universities to what could be a fast-track 21st century for them.

The Socio-Economic Context of Rural Bangladesh

As one of World's most densely populated countries (with an estimated 122 million people) [GOB, 1998] in an area of 146,635 square kilometres, having a density of 832 per sq. km, Bangladesh faces an extremely difficult socio-economic and demographic situation. With 47.5 percent of the total population of the country living below the poverty line (less than 2122 calorie intake) (GOB, 1998) and 27 percent living in extreme poverty (GOB, 1995) Bangladesh is in much worse situation than most of the developing countries in terms of poverty index.

The social structure of the country is dominated by traditional kinship pattern and emerging political magnetism. More and more state intervention in the rural life is alleged to have developed a new configuration of dependency

relationship between the central state, the local power elites and the rural poor, the local notables being the clients of the state and the rural poor as their dependents, In the situation, benefits of rural development programmes are not evenly distributed.

Women and children are specially vulnerable under the prevailing social order. It poses great problem for women and children especially in the rural areas. They are not only socially discriminated, but are subject to threat, exploitation and harassment of all sorts. Though some non-government organisations (NGOs) are strongly playing their policy-advocacy role in favour of 'gender balance' and 'child development', yet a desirable conscious social condition remains a far cry.

Over-exploitation of forest resources for fuelled and cultivation and frequent flood, river-erosion, drought and other natural calamities have created unstoppable environmental and ecological problems affecting development. Although the GOB has launched several programs including the massive Flood Action Plan (FAP) in order to protect environment, the ultimate impact of these strategies still remain equivocal (RDRS, 1996). The devastating flood of 1998, which has claimed some 400 lives, caused damage to 80 percent of school buildings and two-third of the country's arable land, and brought misery to 30 million people (Janakantha, 8 September, 1998). It had an disastrous impact on human habitat, agriculture, economy and environment. It indicates that the country's development policy and action are largely unbecoming.

Poverty and Agriculture

There is a close relationship between poverty, landlessness and rural unemployment. The rural landless,

constituting about 50 percent of rural households, depend almost entirely on agriculture for employment. Rural income inequality as displayed in the pattern of land distribution which indicates that the bottom 40 percent of the population owned 2.8 percent of the land while the top 5 percent owned nearly 30 percent (in 1989-90) (Sobhan, 1998). At the same time, rapid population growth at 1.80 percent a year (GOB, 1998) has taxed the natural resource to a point of breakdown. While agriculture remains the biggest provider for employment, its contribution to GDP has fallen over time (from 41.77 percent in 1984-85 to 32.77 percent in 1994-95 (GOB, 1998). For the unemployed/underemployed rural poor there are some food support schemes like vulnerable groups development (VGD) programme, food for works (FFW) programme etc. But these programmes lack elements such as target orientation, gender specificity and sustainability (Sobhan, 1998).

The Government Intervention

In spite of two and a half decades of economic development, Bangladesh is still regarded largely as a rural economy. Agriculture contributes about one-third of its gross domestic product and about 80 percent of its people still live in the rural areas. The GOB, in its five long-term plans (Five year plans) identified poverty alleviation and rural development as a key area of concern. People's participation and self-reliance were used as the terminology for alleviating poverty and sustainable development in its plan documents (GOB, 1998). These documents, particularly the last two Five Year Plans (1990-1995; 1997-2002) and also the abandoned 20-year Perspective Plan (PP) (1996-2010) aimed to reduce poverty by ensuring better access for the rural poor to the means of production

through their organisations for productive activities, development of agriculture, infrastructures and social service needs. It recognises the potential of utilizing the dynamism of participation of the people, their efficiency in utilizing capital and labour. The Plans also proposed to launch programmes under rural development sector encompassing development of physical infrastructure, irrigation, drainage, flood control and production and employment programme for the rural poor.

Nevertheless, access of the rural poor to basic social services (e.g. health centres, safe water, hygienic sanitation, school etc) is still considered to be inadequate. Large scale corruption and poor service delivery provision are known to be the two key reasons for this structure (Rahman, 1999). Twenty-five years after the independence of the country, it is still an open question as to who the rural development programs benefit most.

The NGO Intervention

NGO activities in Bangladesh have virtually grown into a movement through the last two and half decades of sovereign existence of the country. It has been observed that from at least the late seventies NGOs have been acquiring an increasingly prominent role in the nation's development process (Haque, 1995). The NGOs have achieved in bringing about required institutional changes at the grassroots level to facilitate implementation of need based development efforts to improve the quality of life of the people in general and more particularly of the people living in the rural areas (JICA, 1995).

On account of certain characteristic advantages such as rapid response, flexibility in financial and operational matters

and close relationship with people to be served, NGOs have achieved this noticeable success in speeding up development activities, though still within the limited areas of their operation, covering only 15-20 percent of the total population.

The NGO activities have been especially significant in such vital sectors as, poverty alleviation through micro-credit and skill development training (on agricultural and non-agricultural income-generating activities), human resource development and grassroots institution building.

Lack of Linkage with Universities

Rural development is the process of harnessing internal resources-material and human-with a view to promoting the welfare of the general mass with particular attention to the oppressed or have-nots (Abdullah, 1996). Now if one endorses Abdullah's definition of rural development as acceptable and comprehensive, one can set this definitional parameter to measure the successes and shortfalls of the rural development programmes implemented by various governments and NGOs of Bangladesh.

A somewhat agreeable conclusion is that rural development efforts of these entities have not been a remarkable success in terms of bringing in a qualitative change in living standard of the rural people, Although the NGOs have supplemented government's endeavour to rural development, arguably a sustainable development has not been on surface. Although some social/economic development indicators suggest that there has been improvement in the living standard of the people of Bangladesh over the last two and a half decades [e.g. per capita income increased from US\$ 124 in 1974 to US\$ 260 in 1996

(World Bank, 1997); life expectancy from 45 in 1974 to 58 in 1996; immunisation coverage from 1% in 1981 to 77% in 1996; access to safe water from 56% in 1975 to 96% in 1996) (GOB, 1998), but some studies would not show similar success (Sobhan, 1998; Hussain 1997) in poverty alleviation. They argue that the poverty dimension in Bangladesh is manifold. UNDP, for example, underlined the gender dimension of poverty and explained that in a country where women are economically dependent and vulnerable, educationally backward and politically and socially disadvantaged, they are often worse off than male members because of gender-based differences in the distribution of food and other entitlement within the family (UNDP, 1993).

Although agriculture accounts for about one-third of GDP and nearly 63 percent of the total employed persons in 1995/96 (GOB, 1998), it attained a rather modest growth over the last twenty five years (table 1). As the table shows, there has been a steady growth from the benchmark year until 1992/93, but since then the agriculture sector has resulted a down ward trend (growth rate falling from 95.60 percent in 1992/93 to 92.12 in 1993/94 and further down to 81.34 percent in 1994/95).

TABLE 1

Production of Food Grain in Bangladesh

[In million metric ton]

1972/73	1977/78	1979/80	1989/90	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93	1993/94	1994/95
(Benchmark)								
10.02	13.11	15.8	18.85	18.94	19.40	19.60	19.25	18.17
Growth rate (%)	30.84	57.68	88.12	89.09	93.61	95.60	92.12	81.34

Source: Ministry of Agriculture cited in the *Fifth Five Year Plan 1997-2002*, GOB (1998).

One reason for this modest situation is that Bangladesh has failed to transform the traditional agriculture into a modern one. Frequent natural disasters (e.g. flood, drought, cyclone) are also part of the causes for slow growth. To add to it, one can identify a number of other reasons for the unsatisfactory state of agricultural and rural development (e.g. lack of coordination between government and NGOs, bureaucratic control, weak local government system, lack of people's participation and so on).

But one of key reasons for the limited success in poverty alleviation and rural development is the lack of linkage between educational institutions and rural development programmes/efforts. In other words, the country's universities and other educational institutions have not been encouraged to play their part in the processes of agricultural and rural development.

Beyond Education: Challenges for the 21st Century Universities in Bangladesh

The context of poverty in Bangladesh, both in terms of diversity and magnitude, raises a big question as to how existing social, educational, administrative and political institutions can address this intricate problem. In fact, the reality that waits for the universities in the upcoming millennium is not a pleasant one. The universities, along with other formal and informal institutions, are to look out for appropriate ways to address the problem of underdevelopment and poverty in the rural as well as urban communities. The universities cannot afford to remain disassociated from other development interventionists such as government, NGOs and civil society organisations.

The universities will therefore need to look beyond their

traditional purview of "education". Like the Chinese and Indonesian universities, the universities in Bangladesh are to make a breakthrough in changing their role perception from being "education provider" to a "facilitator of sustainable development". As drawn in Annex A, sustainable livelihood can be achieved through the promotion of a "new learning process" where the government must supplement universities' endeavor with needed legal and policy support in order to create an enabling environment for "Change". With external legal/policy support, universities should be able to strengthen themselves institutionally. With the vigour of promoting the learning process, the universities can extend its arm of facilitation towards three inter-related directions: education, action research and training-targeting students, researchers and professionals respectively. The concerted effort of these three elements of society will help reach the stage of sustainable livelihood.

Facing the Challenge: Role of Selected Universities in the Asia-Pacific Region

Envisaging a new responsibility in poverty alleviation and sustainable rural development, a number of universities in the Asia-Pacific region have worked out plan of action in the recent past. China has moved faster than any other countries in creating an environment for the universities to play a catalyst role in development. In collaboration with local government bodies, the faculty of Agricultural University of Hebei, Northwest Agricultural University, and South China Agricultural University have started implementing a nation-wide project- "Poverty Alleviation through Education", to set up university's own schemes in rural communities on a number of sectors, e.g. improved crop production (maize, corn), raising animal husbandry (rabbit),

high yield fruit trees (apple) etc. The impact of these schemes is visible. People's participation is notably high and productivity is on the increase (Zhigang, 1998; UNESCO, 1998). The experience of Bogor University in Indonesia is also encouraging. It provides services to farmers through a range of participatory actions, extension services, technical assistance, counseling facilities, business meeting, network-building and student community services (Syarief, 1998). Peshwar Agricultural University in Pakistan is planning to launch "Graduate Catalysts" (GCs) scheme involving students in the already implemented extension and information-dissemination programme. The GCs would be required to live with rural people, discuss development issues with them, articulate the people toward self-reliance and develop plans in consultation with them (Khan, 1998). The Open Universities in India are playing a crucial role in promoting a new paradigm of education for sustainable development. They are trying to create what they call a "knowledge network" by linking universities through information technology (IT). A decentralized education system is in the minds of the Indian education planners to create community learning centres having multimedia learning facilities, internet etc for communities in the backward regions and rural areas (Takwale, 1998). In Thailand, it becomes a springboard for changing the direction of university's actions from traditional teaching to modern technology-based community education (Cooparat, 1998).

Facing the Challenge: Where Does Bangladesh Stand on the Scale?

Under the faculty of Social Science, a number of public universities in Bangladesh (including, Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Jahangirnagar, Sylhet and Khulna) offer

Bachelor's, Master's and MPhil courses on development management, rural development and local government through the department of Public Administration, Economics and other social science discipline. Besides, two key research/training institutions namely Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) in Comilla and Rural Development Academy (RDA) in Bogra offer courses on rural development through various training programmes designed for civil servants, local government councilors and others. In the NGO sector also, there are a number of training institutions that offer courses on development policy and management and rural development (e.g. Centre for Development Management of BRAC in Gazipur, Caritas Development Institute of Caritas in Dhaka).

University level education in different branches of agricultural science is offered at the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) at Mymensingh and its affiliated agricultural colleges at Dhaka, Patuakhali and Dinajpur. The Institute of Post Graduate Studies in Agriculture (IPSA), which has been recently declared as Bangabandhu Agricultural University, offers post-graduate education in agriculture. The Agricultural University started with an enrollment capacity of 444 students in 1961/62. In 1985/86, the total enrollment increased to 3,990 (231 females) and the number of teachers employed was 410. In 1989/90, the total enrolment at BAU increased to 4,092. These two academic institutions along with CERDI, a leading training institution situated at Gazipur, provide research and technical support through demonstration farm and some extension work in the rural communities.

In the current plan period [Fifth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002)], it is proposed that for extensive research and

development activities directed towards diversification and modernization of agriculture, these would be strengthened and extended.

But institutional strengthening of universities is not the only answer to address the problems of Bangladesh. A long-term strategy with clear role perception is what is missing from the existing education plan. A system that only produces graduates and fails to share its human resources for the greater benefit of the society, is not somewhat desirable.

Measuring on a 0-10 scale of initiative and actions of universities towards sustainable development, it will emerge that the universities in the region referred above would fall at different levels of the scale. Chinese universities would fall close to one extreme of the scale (i.e. 10) and Bangladesh universities will be seen dropping on another extreme (i.e.0). Indonesia will occupy the centre of the scale and Pakistan, India and Thailand would be falling on the range between 0 and 5 of the scale.

University Intervention: Potential Areas in Bangladesh

The contributions that the universities can make in agriculture/rural development sectors are as follows:

- With due attention given to improve the quality of teaching, training and motivation, the system of agricultural education can be turned supportive of human capital and the science base for agricultural modernization. This is extremely important for a country like Bangladesh where desirable level of modernization has not taken place in agriculture (including farm forestry), fishery and livestock sector.

- The universities can bring about substantial changes in productivity through experimentation (in a controlled area) and replication (in wider geographical area) of modern technology in agriculture (including fisheries and livestock) and rural development sectors.
- Through research and updated knowledge, it is the University teachers/researchers who can help government and NGOs on the technicalities of agricultural development. The government and NGO programmes on agriculture, fisheries, forestry, livestock etc can immensely benefit from University researchers by getting knowledge, skills and training on appropriate species that are cost-effective and environmentally friendly. The selection of species, for example, is one area where the universities can also provide advisory support to model farmers, fishermen, cattle-owners, agro-forestry farmers and so on.
- In this process, closer links can be set up and sustained with other universities and organizations involved in the application and practice of technology at farm level.
- On rural development and local government sector (as local government is closely linked with rural development), teachers and researchers of universities of the concerned faculty can provide advisory support to policy planners and practitioners. Clearly, academics with relevant research background can feed into the process of reform and change. For example, university faculty can support with the vision on democracy and development, which is one of the areas that deserve special attention. In a country like Bangladesh, where too many experimentation in rural development strategies and local government structure has brought confusing

and misleading results, a sound development policy is felt. The university faculty, through knowledge and experience (also through exposure from visit programme, conference, international/regional meeting and dialogue etc), can substantially contribute to policy change in favour of democratic local governance and appropriate rural development schemes.

- The academic circle can also act as advocate for policy change and policy experimentation in the field of agriculture, rural development and local government. In doing so, they can use both print and electronic media to bring policy maker's attention to pertinent issues that needs experimentation and change.

Need for Reform within Universities

To put Bangladesh in perspective, at present Ordinances and rules regulate the universities. Although all public universities enjoy autonomy through legal framework (e.g. Dhaka University Ordinance 1973) some degree of indirect control is exercised by the Ministry of Education.

With the current legal status, universities cannot assume an institutional role to, for example, directly work with communities [as the Hebei University (China) has been extending services and providing advice to farmers of rural communities]. Although faculty members can individually do action research and are consulted by the government on key economic, social, environmental and other policy issues, the institutional action (e.g. intervention) by the university to contribute to the society is not permitted under law. Universities are not seen by the society beyond their academic purview. Therefore, what is needed to make a breakthrough is first of all a strong and consistent dialogue

and a change in existing legal set-up to enable universities to contribute to the society through the above mentioned avenues.

What the Government should Do?

It is imperative that the government should create an enabling environment for the universities to grow into competent centres of technology and practical skills to be able to contribute to poverty alleviation programmes. The government should pronounce its clear-cut policy to allow universities to interact to each other (also with like-minded institutions, e.g. BARD, RDA in Bangladesh) and with external aid agencies (bi-lateral and multi-lateral donor agencies) so as to strengthen their institutional capacities.

The way the universities can enhance their institutional efficiency are through training on project management, action research, networking, performance monitoring system, operation & maintenance etc. With this, they will be better able to work in rural communities in the fields of farm management, rural industrial management, marketing of agricultural products, small-scale rural development schemes, public awareness programmes on socio-economic development, women's development, environmental development, income generating activities and even micro-credit operations. In other words, government should create an environment within which universities can efficiently and effectively contribute to rural societies with freedom, autonomy and flexibility.

Conditions for Success

For the universities to assume the new responsibility of rural development, an enabling environment is a

prerequisite. Changes are to be brought about both within and outside the world of universities:

Internal Changes

- Legal empowerment
- Capacity-building to improve the leadership quality of faculty to take up challenges of rural development (e.g. orientation, training, exposure visits to rural communities)
- Participator approach
- Creation of Graduate Catalysts
- Institutional autonomy
- Accountability to communities

External Changes

- Creating a strong demand side at the national (policy planners), sub-national (policy implementers), and local (rural population) level
- Better coordination between universities and other service providing agencies and institutions
- Networking and wider collaboration among universities within and outside Bangladesh
- Policy action/support at the regional and international level

Linkage between Universities

Linkage between universities among developing countries is essential for:

- replication of good practices, innovation, appropriate and

low-cost technology, and successful ways/modalities of working;

- mutual learning.
- technology transfer
- network-building for global/regional and sub-regional action
- collective advocacy for legal support from UN agencies/international forum

Relevance and Change Process

Not all universities can contribute on all forms and fronts of rural development. Relevance of universities with typical needs of the demand side, i.e. rural people is to be carefully examined before attaching any new responsibility to any university in Bangladesh. A matrix, showing the type of universities with area of contribution and process, is presented in Annex B.

Collaboration with existing service providers, i.e. government agencies, local government bodies NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), other universities, researches and global communities are essential for bringing in a sustainable change in rural development. The collaboration should take place at various stages of interventions, i.e. planning, implementation and impact evaluation.

Mobilizing Rural People: Another Precondition

The readiness of rural population (farmers, fishermen, cattle-rearers, planters) to interact with universities would be a precondition for the universities to intervene. Unless the

targeted beneficiaries (rural people) are aware of the advantages of working with academics/researchers on agricultural schemes and rural development projects, any intervention, rural development project or an action strategy of a university is bound to fail.

Therefore, a strong demand side is to be created in the rural communities that would cooperate with university faculty at different phases of programme intervention i.e. planning, implementation, experimentation, replication and evaluation. In this, the government as well as NGOs should work together to mobilize rural people to set conditions for success for the interventionists. The government and NGOs can work with universities through a coordination mechanism to be set at the sub-national levels (i.e. district and thana).

The local government bodies and NGOs can also help through identifying the targeted people for various support. The targeting of development interventions and gains on the neediest groups (especially women) will bring in justice: otherwise privileged groups will siphon off fruits of such intervention.

Advantages/Disadvantages of the Proposed Approach

Advantages

- Universities can work and demonstrate their ability with highest academic and practical exposure with all levels of society: a) advising policy issues at the policy making (parliamentary/ministerial level); b) providing suggestion on technical/managerial matters related to agricultural/rural development to technical (e.g. Bangladesh Rural Development Board/Agriculture

Extension Department/Department of Fisheries etc); c) demonstrate and replicate models/schemes working with field level implementers/beneficiaries (rural population)

- They can work with development partners (donor level). Some of the donor agencies are keen to do policy experiment for sustainable development. At this level the academics/researchers can prove their potentials by getting engaged in action research and programme evaluation/monitoring for quality improvement in which government and NGOs are not usually good at both in terms of efficiency and impartiality.
- As a traditionally neutral entity, universities have the advantage of working with all conventional interventionists. In Bangladesh, where government and NGOs are not in good terms, the universities can bridge the gap and break the ice to demonstrate a path of integrity and cooperation for all that serve the society.

Disadvantages

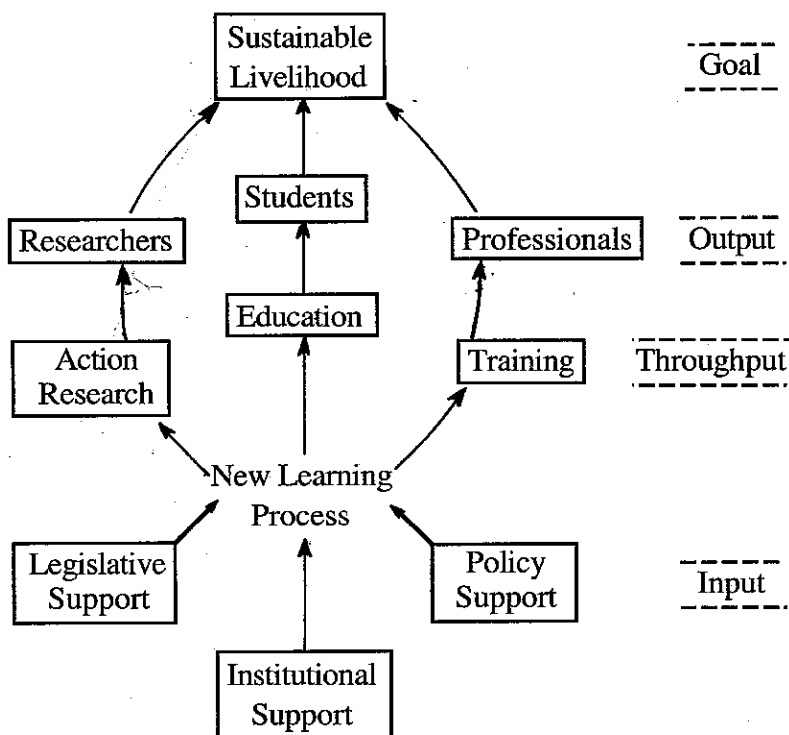
- By getting engaged in rural development programmes/community support actions, part of universities' faculty may lose their traditional academic orientation and become less enthusiastic in delivering lectures to students, write research papers, and do other academic activities.
- Universities may invite public criticism in case they fail to implement a programme or become unsuccessful after implementation. This would lead to destroying image of faculty members and thereby universities themselves may be targets of condemnation.

A Concluding Point

The graduates and post-graduates of the universities are already turning into productive human resource and making their mark in the civil service, NGO sector and other public/private agencies as officials, researchers, and other types of professionals. Nonetheless, in actual analysis, what remains underutilized is the institutional capacity and human resource of the universities themselves that can be turned into productive power to be used for the transformation of farmer's economy and sustainable rural development.

Annex A

Challenge Tree for the 21st Century Universities



Annex B

Relevance and Process

<u>Type of University</u>	<u>Area of Contribution</u>	<u>Process of Change</u>
General	Policy support/Action	Coordination/Linkage/ Institutional collaboration
Technical	Extension work/It support	Participatory planning/ Need-based service
Agricultural	Extension work/Schemes/ Advisory support	Consultation with rural People/Farmers
Medical	Primary health service	Target orientation/Need- based planning

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