

A 20-Year Perspective on Rural Poverty and Sustainability: Where Are We Today?

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SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

THE UNITED NATIONS' AMBITIOUS ATTEMPT to merge the poverty eradication and sustainability agendas in the post-2015 development framework of Sustainable Development Goals suggests that enough groundwork has been done to enable this merger to take place. This article will reflect on this issue from a rural poverty and rural development perspective, tracing policies and thinking about rural development from the mid- to late-1990s through the present day, through reference to a textbook, an international report, and other works in which I have personally been involved. History has raised and to some extent resolved various issues across the poverty eradication and sustainability agendas, which may offer pointers for the current global discussion.

As the author of a 1998 textbook titled *Sustainable Rural Development*, I have struggled with the merger of poverty eradication and sustainability before.¹ At that time, I was able to argue that a paradigm shift was taking place, involving the retreat of the state post-structural adjustment from control over interventions toward setting policy frameworks. This allowed space for the private sector and also a third sector of collective and civil society organizations to focus on sustainable development. That third sector has emerged in many developing countries and has brought with it a greater focus on sustainability. However, even though the private sector has been slow to develop in many rural areas, many states have

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not in fact promoted the third sector as much as possible, and recently there has been a drift back to heavily state-supported programs in agriculture. As a result, the sustainability perspective remains rather stifled.

Nevertheless, there are now many initiatives, some large-scale, of the sort described in *Sustainable Rural Development*. These now work alongside and compete with states in terms of thinking and implementation. Many have resource conservation goals as well as participatory approaches at their core. The state, having been largely disconnected politically from its rural citizens, is now much more subject to scrutiny and questioning by a better-organized rural population. Where this is the case, states are less able to be as predatory as they were in the past, and having been able to perpetrate resource exploitation unchallenged, there are now often dissenting voices and debates protesting resource exploitation. The extent to which dissent is conducted democratically and transparently varies, but debate and dissent are much more widespread. This situation gives the state new roles in arbitrating different interests, which some states do well but others do in ways that foment conflict.

The rest of the article outlines how knowledge about rural poverty has evolved since the 1990s and identifies major points of intersection with the environmental sustainability agenda. It then goes on to discuss a number of win-win solutions, where both extreme poverty and sustainability concerns are addressed. Finally, it asks whether the post-2015 development framework as currently discussed is likely to create a wider space for such solutions.

RURAL POVERTY

Does this paradigm shift, admittedly incomplete, include the rural poor? This question will be answered by looking at the two most recent International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) Rural Poverty Reports.²

The first Rural Poverty Report from 2001 adopted a classic, Asian “green revolution” approach to rural poverty, arguing that while acquiring more assets—in particular land and water—is critical, technologies to make those assets have greater yield are even more so.³ These will also enhance employment opportunities, which is critical for asset-poor people who rely on selling their labor. The important technologies mentioned include yield-increasing food crop cultivars and soil and water conservation. It was recognized that poor farm households might not be able to afford the investments required for soil and water conservation where they do not generate immediate increased returns to labor, leaving new seeds and fertilizers to do the heavy lifting of poverty reduc-

tion. This was very much an agriculture-first strategy, though education was also acknowledged to be important and in short supply in rural areas.

The second report from 2011 makes use of the findings of the Chronic Poverty Research Centre and other work on poverty dynamics to propose that while agriculture is involved in stories of escaping poverty, it is often nonfarm self-employment, wage labor, rural-urban or rural-rural migration, or some combination of these which takes households out of poverty.⁴ In policy terms, this is challenging since few governments organize their policies on the rural nonfarm sector well, and many programs such as microfinance may not reach it. In addition, the “sustainable intensification” of agriculture promoted by the report begins to look somewhat different from the green revolution, with a more catholic interpretation of approaches to enhance income rather than simply maximize yield and a more integrated approach to resource conservation, which is seen as a basis of productivity benefits. It is not yet a full-blooded switch to the more radical or principled forms of sustainable agriculture, but it is hovering around the edges.

The report also emphasizes two additional issues of importance. First, it is necessary to address the vulnerability—defined as exposure to risks—of both the rural poor and rural populations more widely. Environmental disasters can be impoverishing—as much as ill health or the need to keep up social obligations such as dowry, bride wealth, and funerals—so there is a need for disaster-risk reduction and management as well as insurance and social assistance. This is an area into which rural development has barely ventured. Second, increasing the synergies between education, enterprise, and the labor market is critical in enabling nonagricultural pathways out of poverty. Fostering education systems—which are expanding rapidly but are underfunded—that produce students with skills useful in the market or in microenterprise development is not easy.

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THE UNRESOLVED DEBATE ON GREEN REVOLUTION AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

For the wider ambition to harmonize global sustainability and poverty goals, the experience of making agriculture more sustainable is sobering. There has been significant progress at the international level toward resolving the different approaches to agriculture, which gives grounds for cautious optimism about the possibility of a resolution of wider sustainability-poverty differences in the

post-2015 framework. Both the 2011 IFAD Report (“Sustainable agricultural intensification”) and the 2008 World Development Report (“Greening the green revolution”) have inched toward but not yet quite arrived at sustainable agriculture.⁵

Climate change is the propelling force in pushing for a resolution here in energy, construction, or transport. Agriculture has emerged as a significant CO₂ emitter, and while not as significant a source as energy, change is nevertheless essential. However, achieving such global public goods has become a difficult task, especially in an age of austerity when political parties shrink from such commitments that require diversion of public resources from consumption into investment. Until the global climate funds improve on their dismal disbursement records in all but the wealthiest and best-organized developing countries and there are significant resources to support Payment for Environmental Services schemes, there will be inadequate incentives to alter farm systems in favor of sustainability.⁶ Farmers already engaged in conservation agriculture, organic farming, alley crop farming, or other more sustainable forms of agriculture are of course ahead of the curve but cannot always claim the premium from their niche market status. Much sustainably produced agricultural output goes into the standard value chains. Payment for soil carbon conservation could be expanded to include developing countries as a climate mitigation measure, although there are other constraints to overcome before poor farm households may benefit, in particular insecure land tenure. Interestingly, China is the leading exponent of Payment for Environmental Services, which offer financial rewards to resource owners or users for their conservation efforts. Perhaps this is recognition of the speed and severity of China’s environmental deterioration.

At least now there is serious interest in exploring the food security implications of switching production to sustainable agriculture, and models are being developed.⁷ At the national level, total quantity of food available is of course important, but household food security is a matter of being able to afford or produce adequate food, and therefore has more to do with incomes than with absolute yields. In any case, if there is a common finding from research comparing sustainable production systems with average systems in developing countries, it is that the more sustainable ones outperform the others in terms of yields largely because they involve a degree of intensification compared to the norm.⁸

VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE

The technology of farming systems is one meeting point between the sustain-

ability and poverty agendas. The IFAD 2011 Report has a strong emphasis on building resilience in the face of hazards and shocks at household, local, and national levels as well as the need to reduce vulnerability stemming from poverty so that agriculture and rural development contribute to poverty reduction. This is another point at which these agendas intersect strongly and is one that has gained growing recognition since 2000. Neither the 2000 and 2001 Millennium Development Goal frameworks nor the 2001 and 2001 IFAD Rural Poverty Reports expressed a concern for vulnerability. Even by the landmark 2008 World Development Report on agriculture, vulnerability was not a central concern, perhaps because its focus was agriculture for development rather than agriculture for poverty reduction. Agricultural agencies have been remarkably unsuccessful at incorporating risk issues into their policies.

Figure 1 below illustrates that vulnerability should be a central concern in showing how impoverishment can significantly reduce the degree to which poverty can be reduced. The major sources of impoverishment include environmental hazards, ill health and untimely deaths, social obligations, and conflict. Environmental hazards include drought and other climate-related (such as flooding and typhoons) and extreme events (such as volcanic eruptions). Drought is the most widely impoverishing.⁹

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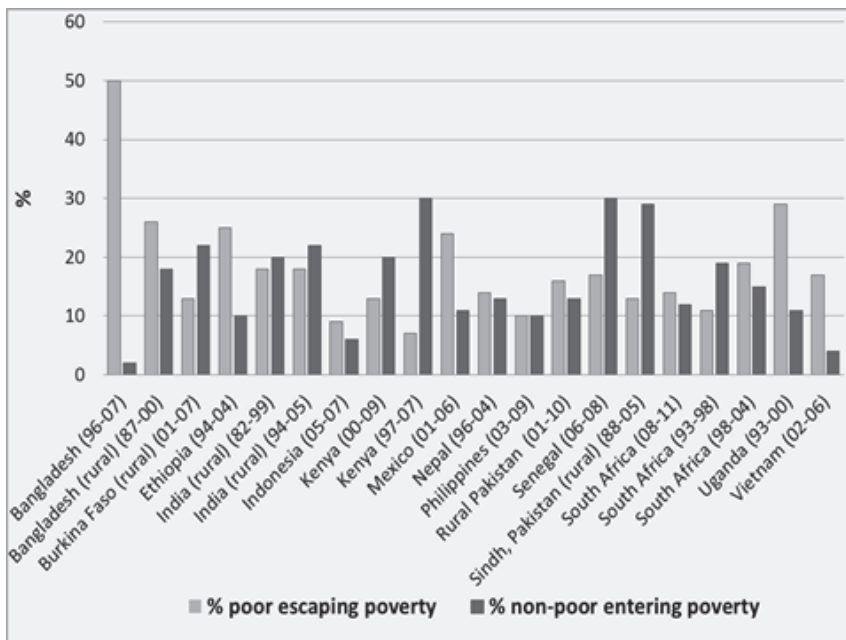


Figure 1: Impoverishment can cancel escapes from poverty¹⁰

Addressing vulnerability involves a complex policy and program agenda, including disaster risk management, social protection and insurance, conflict prevention, health services, and challenging impoverishing social norms and practices. Unfortunately, this goes far beyond a standard rural development agenda.

RURAL POVERTY TODAY

As previously mentioned, exits from poverty often involve individuals finding and exploiting nonagricultural occupations, often alongside farming, and contributing the incomes or greater security they can achieve to augment household welfare. This means that the rural nonfarm sector is much more important than most governments have so far acknowledged since the rural nonfarm sector tends to be neglected and falls between various organizational mandates. None of the regular line ministries such as agriculture, employment, business development and private sector, or education focus strongly on it. Nonfarm jobs are often found through rural–urban migration, so urbanization is important. The pattern of urbanization can have big impacts on rural poverty through the nature of the infrastructure connecting cities with their regions and cities’ patterns of economic activities.¹¹ While elite attitudes toward migration have somewhat changed, hostility toward migrants remains significant. Sometimes this is institutionalized and hard to reform, as in China or Vietnam, while at other times it is a matter of influencing social norms and behavior. The national implications of urbanization are in most countries weakly acknowledged in policy. Cities tend to be planned for their own purposes—if there is poverty to be reduced, it is urban poverty—perfectly legitimately, of course, but this does not allow for the powerful role cities can play in reducing poverty more generally.

A second important issue is the significance of rural and agricultural wage labor. While the importance of rural labor is widely acknowledged in India, there are many other developing countries where self-employed farmers form the popular image of the rural poor in the media and among policy makers and researchers. Very often today, this is not correct, and even where it is correct, a range of 30 to 70 percent of rural household income comes from nonfarming activity, including wage employment. Up to 30 percent of the income of the poorest quintile of rural households has been found to be from agricultural wage labor alone.¹² There are significant regional variations in such patterns, with sub-Saharan African rural households engaged in more nonfarm wage labor except where there is large-scale estate agriculture, such as in Malawi.

The importance of wage labor is no doubt linked to the experience of losing

access to land, though this has not recently been researched. In a small number of countries for which there is comparable and good quality data, we found that the poorest quintile of households was losing access to—and in this case, ownership of—land over time (Figure 2). While this might be considered a normal part of the development process, in the light of the importance of accumulating land as part of many trajectories out of poverty, it is a dramatic finding.

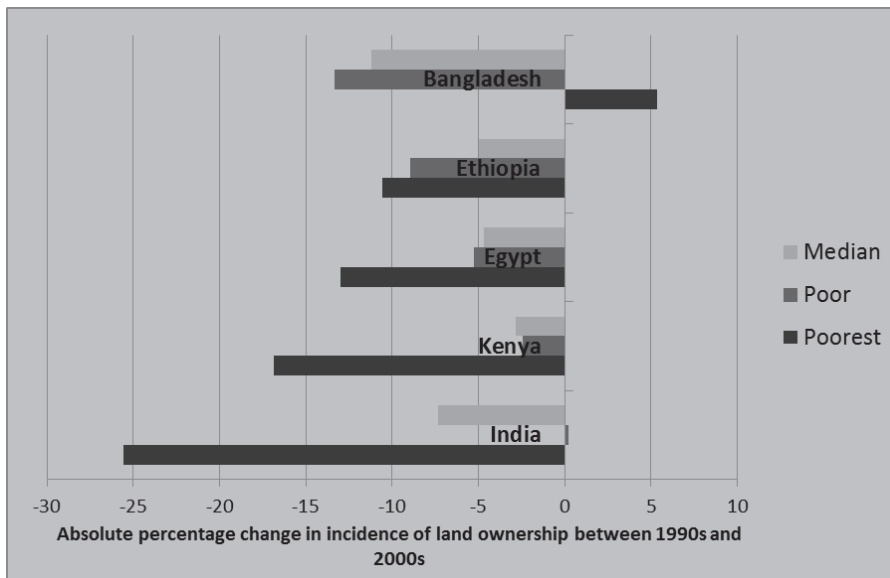


Figure 2: Decreases in land assets among the poor and the poorest¹³

There are some striking social issues characterizing rural poverty today. These include the continued greater likelihood of poor adolescent girls marrying early. In a few countries, they are marrying earlier in absolute terms, and in most countries the poorest girls' age of marriage is lagging behind that of less poor girls.¹⁴ In some regions, alcoholism features strongly in stories of chronic poverty and impoverishment.¹⁵ Such issues of social norms and behavior are again not standard topics for rural development policies and programmers. While early marriage is "treatable" by keeping girls in school for longer—an approach that many countries have tried, tested, and succeeded in implementing—addressing widespread alcoholism as both a symptom and cause of poverty is a "stuck policy." Except where prohibition movements exist, this policy issue is stuck between the interests of alcoholic drinkers and the industry, including the interests of the many women and men who make a proportion of their incomes from brewing beer and liquor.

A number of recent publications from the Chronic Poverty Advisory Network have actively searched for likely win-win solutions. In agriculture, accumulating and conserving assets (including natural resources) is more important than developing new technologies because there are generally plenty of technologies available for those who have the assets to use them.¹⁶ This illustrates what must be a mantra: there are different solutions for different groups. Disaggregation of the rural population is essential. Acquiring access to land and water is often an important part of escaping poverty. One school of thought argues that some

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smallholders should step out of farming, while others hang on, and still others step up.¹⁷ While this might be ideal and was taken up as an idea in the 2008 World Development Report, in

practice, households would rather combine livelihood strategies than step out voluntarily. For those who do step out and become full-time workers, and for the increasing numbers of households who are at least partly dependent on wage work, the nature of the labor market and labor market policies and interventions become a very important sector of policy.¹⁸

There is a strong correlation between chronic poverty and poor access to energy.¹⁹ It is plausible, given the importance of nonfarm employment and self-employment in escaping poverty, that gaining access to a reliable energy supply would be a driver of escaping poverty. For isolated areas off the grid, “green” (renewable) and decentralized energy systems have significant potential for expanding access. However, many poor household probably cannot manage the up-front costs, so a sympathetic pricing structure and possibly subsidies would be necessary, whether within a locality or nationally, to make it possible for the poorest households. Even without that, expanding access will likely have positive employment effects.

Education needs to underpin pathways out of poverty. It must be of good quality, be provided for enough years of study, and supported by new models of second chance and vocational education and preschool provision.²⁰ There are many links between better education for poor children and sustainable development, and the most important of these is the effect of education on delaying the age of marriage and childbearing and thereby the rate of population growth.

IS THE POST-2015 FRAMEWORK LIKELY TO HELP ACHIEVE WIN-WIN SOLUTIONS?

The establishment of the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals as a follow up to the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 and the commitment to integrate the post-2015 poverty and human development goals is a good start. While it is not clear that such an extended public discussion process as is taking place can lead to a strong and integrated framework, it is brave and right to try, and the public discussion will benefit the cause of equitable and sustainable development in the medium to long term. There are definitely areas of overlap in the sustainability and poverty agendas where win-win solutions are possible. Examples include the following:

- A food security goal should be included that emphasizes sustainable farming systems and decent minimum agricultural wages among its component targets and indicators. It should focus on the 1 billion food-insecure (and mostly poor) people, with indicators for the food security of the poorest among them. Even if there are different interpretations of what this constitutes, this should be possible given the progress that has been made moving toward sustainable agriculture.
- A goal of energy access for all should be included, with an emphasis on renewable systems for off-grid areas, financing of up-front costs of any systems, and monitoring its access by the poorest people. The difficult context for this is the need to redistribute access to polluting power across the globe, but decentralized renewable sources offer at least a partial way out of this political difficulty.
- A population goal would be very controversial and unlikely to be adopted, given the fraught history of the universal access to sexual and reproductive health MDG target, though it is worth an attempt.²¹ A population goal should be especially focused on the poorest individuals who have been left behind in the demographic transition to their great detriment. Short of a dedicated population goal, building components into other goals, such as keeping especially poor adolescent girls in school for longer, making a reality of universal access to reproductive health services and providing targeted social protection to the poorest would be a useful second best.

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There have been four main comprehensive proposals for goals, targets, and indicators so far, but sustainable production and consumption is an issue receiving relatively little direct attention in the goal proposals to date.²² Disconnect

remains between environmental sustainability and income growth that will need to be solved as discussions continue.

The bigger challenge in implementing any such win-win solutions is the accountability of governments—which will sign up for these goals at the United Nations—to citizens, especially poor ones. Radical measures require constant political and social mobilization. This is the backdrop to most progressive national constitutions, political parties, progressive laws, and their serious implementation. While accountability is arguably improving constantly, with various communications facilities—such as mobile phones and computers—available to most, if not all, of humankind (with the poorest often left out of course), it may be felt that accountability and transparency objectives are becoming less important since there are now many more channels available to achieve them. While governments may understandably be reluctant to commit themselves to these issues in a post-2015 development framework, commitments need to exist to create space for civil society and social movements to instigate and demand change and make sure it happens. Of course, some governments allow little space for social movements and civil society at all. In these situations, the onus is then on the governing classes to lead in a progressive way, joining up poverty and sustainability policies. The widely used Chinese slogan “pollute first, clean up later” suggests the scale of the difficulty. 

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NOTES

1. Andrew Shepherd, *Sustainable Rural Development* (London: Routledge, 1998).
2. My Overseas Development Institute colleagues and I had a significant role in shaping the 2011 Rural Poverty Report, see: IFAD, *Rural Poverty Report 2011: New realities, new challenges, new opportunities for tomorrow's generation* (Rome: IFAD, 2010).
3. IFAD, *The Challenge of Ending Rural Poverty: Rural Poverty Report* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
4. Ibid.
5. IFAD, *Rural Poverty Report 2011; World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2011).
6. “Home Page,” *Climate Funds Update*.
7. French National Institute for Agricultural Research, *Agrimonde Foresight Study: How do we feed the world in 2050?* (Paris: INRA, 2013).
8. Jules Pretty, et al., “Resource-conserving agriculture increases yields in developing countries,” *Environment Science and Technology* 40, no. 4 (2006): 1114–19; Intensification in this context means bringing more resources—labor, tools and machinery, water, energy, and researched inputs—to bear on the farm field.
9. Andrew Shepherd, et al., *The geography of poverty, disasters and climate extremes in 2030* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2013).
10. Amanda Lenhardt and Andrew Shepherd, *What has happened to the other 50%?* (London: Chronic Poverty Advisory Network, 2013).
11. Chronic Poverty Research Centre: *Escaping Poverty Traps: The Chronic Poverty Report 2008-9* (London: Chronic Poverty Research Centre, 2008).
12. World Bank, *Agriculture for Development*, 79.

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13. Lenhardt and Shepherd, *What has happened to the other 50%?* (2013), 10.
14. Ibid., 12–13.
15. Kate Bird and Isaac Shinyekwa, *Multiple shocks and downward mobility: learning from the life histories of rural Ugandans* (London: Chronic Poverty Research Centre, 2001).
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18. Chronic Poverty Advisory Network, *Employment Policy Guide: Working Out of Chronic Poverty* (2013).
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21. David Hulme, *The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): A Short History of the World's Biggest Promise* (Manchester, U.K.: Brooks World Poverty Institute, 2009).
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