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The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka

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"A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith
in their mission can alter the course of history." - Ghandi

Introduction

Sri Lanka is one of the highest achieving developing countries in Asia on a number of indicators, but despite decades of economic growth and welfare politics, the country still faces socio-economic development problems - especially in the rural areas, and in gender and empowerment issues. Political mobilisation and access to information and education is vital to the empowerment of disadvantaged people, and changes in social laws, civil codes, and cultural traditions are necessary to achieve equality. Creating better opportunities for disadvantaged women includes supporting their rights to land and credit, raise their bargaining power, and improve their access to education, training and new technology. NGOs are often better able to improve poor groups' situation as they tend to be more flexible, are closer to the groups in question, and generally have broad access to funding and technical assistance. The Sarvodaya Movement offers an alternative model for sustainable and inclusive development that also has universal moral appeal. Its concept advocates true self-realisation through dedicated service to the community, especially its weaker sections, hence it is a social ethic for the welfare of all. Sarvodaya further argues that development is the process of awakening of individuals, families, rural communities, urban groups, the nation and the world. The process of awakening is executed on all levels of society, and microfinance plays an important role in most of the projects undertaken. Sarvodaya fulfils a great need in the modern world, and its principles could advantageously be transferred to, and implemented by, other groups and organisations involved in human development.

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement

Sarvodaya, meaning 'the awakening of us all' combines spiritual and social change, and emphasises enlightenment through sharing. Shramadana, a Sanskrit word, translates to donating one's labour without material rewards, as compensation comes in the form of peace of mind and good karma for the future. The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement (Sarvodaya) was founded in 1958 by Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne - a teacher at a prestigious Buddhist high school - who wanted to better students' understanding of poverty issues in poor, low-caste villages. Ariyaratne's intention to give members of the urban upper class insight into the actual living conditions of their fellow citizens was achieved by the establishment of 'holiday work camps' (Novartis 2004). His students lived with the

villagers, listened to their problems, planted gardens and built schools and temples, and their experiences soon led to hundreds of schools organising similar camps (Hoang n.d.).

Sarvodaya has evolved to become Sri Lanka's most influential indigenous NGO with a development strategy and programme of its own. It is a national movement with global linkages, and was incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1972 (UNDP 2005). Sarvodaya rejects both the capitalist model of development, which encourages individualism, competition, consumerism and affluence, and the communist model of development through violent revolution and state-imposed institutional socio-economic structures (Premasiri 1997). It instead seeks a holistic middle path to socio-economic development, emphasising projects related to honouring cultural survival, creating harmony between ethnic groups, community economics, organic agriculture and projects for preserving biodiversity (Bandarage n.d.). Sarvodaya's vision of a new social order is influenced by the ethos of non-violence voiced by Ghandi, in line with the teachings of the Buddha Dharma, and "conforms to the Buddhist principle that one who cares for one's spiritual well-being cares for others, and one who cares for others cares for one's spiritual well-being" (UNDP 2005; Premasiri 1997:5). Sarvodaya recognises four principles of personality development as the very foundation of Sri Lanka's Buddhist rural culture; loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (Premasiri 1997). Dr. Ariyaratne convenes public peace meditations to change the 'physosphere', and one of these gatherings attracted 650,000 participants - which might well be the largest meditation for peace in history (Macy 2002).

Sarvodaya's philosophy is ultimately based on compassion, detachment from desires, and the cessation of suffering. Buddhism and socio-economic development are not necessarily contradictory, as long as Buddhist values shape, control, and delimit the means and goals (Hoang n.d.). Sarvodaya thinkers are not opposed to the welfare of the people but to the welfare state which robs individuals of their initiative; hence they envisage a society wherein the people plan and carry out welfare work for themselves, and the task of state authority is confined to inspiring and encouraging them in this responsibility, and to render help when they need it (Ratna 1990). Sarvodaya believes that access to work is the beginning of everything. It encourages individuals to work towards double liberation in the Buddhist sense; freeing one's mind of its limitations; and liberating the community from unjust socio-economic conditions in a non-violent way - by doing community work, by sharing, and by participating in the holistic development of the community (Novartis 2004). The organisation has a long-term development plan, where peace is considered a critical factor. It points out that the seeds of Sri Lanka's civil war were planted 500 years ago with European colonization, and estimates that its healing will require an equal amount of time. The 500-year peace plan is rooted in the movement's holistic philosophy, as seen in one of the components that state that by the year 2100, Sri Lanka will become "the first country to eliminate poverty, both economic and spiritual" (Macy 2002). Sarvodaya considers poverty as being a sense of personal and collective powerlessness, and stress that 'awakening' must take place through social, economic and political interaction. The movement emphasizes the interconnectedness of reality, and calls for awakening at four levels: the personal, the village, the nation, and the world (Bean 2000). The concept of 'awakening' has six major dimensions; spiritual,

moral, cultural, social, economic and political; and there should be balanced progress along all these dimensions (Premasiri 1997). Personal awakening is considered being interdependent with the awakening of one's local community, but both forms play a part in the further awakening of the nation and ultimately the world (Hoang n.d.).

The movement defines development as a task to be undertaken across all sectors: cultural, economic, social, ecological, and political (Novartis 2004). Sarvodaya's projects start with the poorest people, and achievements are measured by socio-economic development as well as human transformation. It has identified ten elementary and basic needs for developing human potential in the Buddhist sense; a clean and beautiful environment, adequate provision of clean drinking water, minimal supplies of clothing, adequate and balanced nutrition, simple housing, basic health care, basic communication facilities, a minimal supply of energy, holistic education, and satisfaction of intellectual and cultural needs. Economic development for maximization of profit or creating a consumer society is understood to cause ignorance, greed, and desire which, in Buddhist thinking, cause suffering (Hoang n.d.). Hence Sarvodaya's approach to development is to pursue an alternative, simple, and sustainable lifestyle based on reducing material desires to counter consumerism and the resulting widened divide between rich and poor (Govinnage 2005).

'Village awakening' (Gramodaya) is one of the most important parts of Sarvodaya's development programme. It is believed that a prosperous society will be achieved if villages are developed and autonomy established, and Sarvodaya's avowed aim is to develop the 23,000 villages of Sri Lanka in which almost 90 per cent of the Sri Lankan people live (Premasiri, 1997). The first Gramodaya programme was carried out in 100 selected villages in 1966 (Novartis 2004). A Gramodaya programme has ten components; capacity building in the community, early childhood development, community health, relief and rehabilitation, development of village infrastructure, environment and biodiversity, communication development, development of integrated education, peace work and youth work, and applied research. Opposing internal and external forces are identified prior to the establishment of a Shramadana camp, and both inner and outer constraints must be removed in order for awakening to take place. Internal forces may include conflict, exploitation, and distrust among villagers themselves, while external forces may be absentee landowners, moneylenders, middlemen, and traders (Bean 2000). Village-level consultation and mobilisation is a critical feature of Sarvodaya's approach to development, hence it has evolved a processes which in secular development terminology is known as participative decision-making (Zadek 1993). In this process, the afore-mentioned constraints to Gramodaya are sought to be eliminated; and Sarvodaya's dependence on local communities for development projects ensures that the projects initiated are in accordance with the needs of the community.

A Shramadana camp provides villagers with the opportunity to get together to achieve a simple but vital goal, and those involved gather good karma by helping each other. It is an educative experience from which three major benefits are expected: provision of a first-hand opportunity for rural and urban groups to meet in a beneficial manner; stimulation of self-reliance and self-help in rural communities after generations of inaction and dependence; and the emergence of a new rural leadership which is not split

by caste, religion or political commitments (Premasiri 1997). Meetings for the entire village are held, and groups of villagers are encouraged to articulate their own needs and the path by which those needs might be satisfied (Zadek 1993). In the first stage of a Shramadana camp, work is organised and local task forces established; in stage two the task forces evolve into functional groups based on the individual's and community's needs; in stage three a village Sarvodaya society is legally incorporated, and the groups continue to define their needs, and organise and undertake projects; in stage four emphasis is placed on strengthening of income-generating activities along with continuing social development; and by the fifth stage the community has matured to a level where it can offer services or economic surplus to other, less-developed villages (Bean 2000). Upon completion of the Gramodaya development, villagers have positively experienced the relationship between personal and social change; and the village and its inhabitants are equipped to contribute to greater awakening on the national and international levels.

Many of Sarvodaya's rules reflect urban Buddhist bourgeoisie class values, which in some cases are imposed upon villagers, hence the Sarvodaya reality versus its ideal model of society has been criticised (Hoang n.d.), and issues of favouritism, nepotism and bureaucracy within the hierarchy of the movement have provoked critique and caused problems (Bandarage n.d.). Sarvodaya's consensus system provides a minority with a veto on all decisions, but people can be educated to look at things from the point of view of the common good and not to press their opposition too far against any overwhelming majority (Ratna 1990). The importance of building a self-reliant economic base for the implementation of Sarvodaya development policy has become a matter of key importance, but the organisation's effectiveness in challenging secular systems of thought - which seek to displace the structures of knowledge and wisdom of traditional societies - is called into question (Premasiri 1997). In sharp contradiction to its ideal of self-reliance, Sarvodaya is heavily dependent on foreign aid, but Ariyaratne argues that self-reliance is a relative term in impoverished countries suffering from structural inequalities, and material and psychological dependence (Bean 2000).

Sarvodaya and Microfinance

Cooperative movements were first introduced in 1911, and were recognised as effective tools for poverty alleviation and economic development long before the NGO-driven, donor funded microfinance projects emerged (Keppetiyagama & Gamage n.d.). NGOs working with integrated rural development emerged on a large scale in the 1960s, and today virtually all villages have their own divisions - which since the 1980s have become popular tools for microfinance delivery (Charitonenko & de Silva 2002). Microfinance is the provision of a broad range of financial services such as deposits, loans, payment services, money transfers, and insurance to poor and low-income households and their micro enterprises. Microfinance institutions (MFIs) have three key principles in common: they know their market; they use special techniques to slash administrative costs; and they use special techniques to motivate repayment, including "the use of self-selected groups in which members guarantee each other's loans, intensive motivation and supervision of borrowers, incentives for borrowers, progressive lending, and compulsory

savings requirements" (McGuire & Conroy 2000:3). The sources of microfinance include rural banks and cooperatives, NGOs, money lenders, and shopkeepers. The Grameen Bank model, developed by Professor M. Yunus in Bangladesh in 1975, is perhaps the best known microfinance model, where field staff promote the programme by targeting disempowered people - generally with a strong focus on poor women. The bank's highly effective techniques for lending to the poor are based on the practice of providing service at the village level, promoting and motivating groups of the poor, use of group guarantees, compulsory savings mobilisation, intensive supervision of borrowers, transparency of credit operations, and cost effective operations (McGuire & Conroy 2000).

There is a remarkable variation in the degree to which the potential market for microfinance is being served in different countries, but a handful of countries - including Sri Lanka - stand out with high penetration in the market (Honohan 2004), especially in rural areas. Traditionally, households in low-income families had no access to credit from formal sources; hence they had to depend on moneylenders - who charged extortionate interest rates (Keppetiyagama & Gamage n.d.). By the mid-1980s there was a widespread view that the Sarvodaya societies should play a more active role in the economic lives of their members, and this led to the birth of SEEDS in 1987. SEEDS was the first centrally managed, specialised microfinance NGO in Sri Lanka, and is today by far the largest NGO-managed microfinance program (Charitonenko & de Silva 2002). It works with nearly 2400 village-level societies across 18 of the 26 districts in Sri Lanka, and its total staff of over 450 persons has granted over 1.3 billion Sri Lankan Rupees (SLRs) worth of loans; provided 50,000 small businesses with services through training inputs; and played a key role in fostering and encouraging village savings, which now total nearly SLRs 470 million (UNDP 2005). SEEDS' distinctive identity and core values are rooted in the concept of a no-poverty, no-affluence society, and the organisation seeks to offer an alternative development model that sustains socio-cultural values, develops society as a whole, and encourages economic activities that do not adversely affect the environment (SEEDS 2004). It provides training in new skills and economic activities, and the long-term support required to ensure their sustained application; introduces new technologies - both improved techniques for traditional and non-traditional crops and non-farm economic activities; and encourages the formation of groups within the village societies to undertake joint economic activities (UNDP 2005). The four strategic pillars of SEEDS' organisational culture that overarch all activities and programs are: meeting basic needs, participation and inclusion, capacity enhancement and self-reliance, and ethics based on a value system (SEEDS 2004).

Microfinance can provide an effective way to assist and empower poor women, who make up a large proportion of the poor and suffer disproportionately from poverty. A significant number of women in low-income families head their households. This number is around 21 percent in rural areas, 40 percent in urban low-income settlements, and around 50 percent for the war affected Northeast (Keppetiyagama & Gamage n.d.). Studies have shown that microfinance has a positive impact on socio-economic variables such as children's schooling and household nutrition status; that it has a positive correlation with poverty reduction; and that its impact on Asian women's empowerment

was generally positive (McGuire & Conroy 2000; ADB 2000). It is also documented that women often express a need for financial services such as saving, insurance, or housing mortgage schemes rather than credit (ADB 2004a). In addition to its 'bottom-up' aspects, attention to communities, focus on women, and aim to help the disadvantaged, microfinance can also alleviate poverty while providing incentives to work (McGuire & Conroy 2000). Unemployment in Sri Lanka is predominantly a female phenomenon. It is suggested that this is one reason why women are heavily represented in the micro enterprise sector, and a study of 10,000 micro enterprises in 1992 revealed that 75 percent of the employees were women (Charitonenko & de Silva 2002). Microfinance can increase returns on women's labour, but programs have tended to focus on improving technologies and skills in traditional production rather than seeking more productive areas for investment (ADB 2004a).

In addition to addressing poverty and economic development, microfinance can also have impact on other areas of society. Sri Lanka is a conflict-ridden country with severe and deep-rooted cultural disparities and inequities between the major population groups. Microfinance encourages conflict resolution by empowering members to establish their own organisation, which is in line with Sarvodaya's philosophy. For communities divided by conflict or caste, developing credit and savings associations could be a way to bring people together, focusing on economic activities and cooperation rather than differences (Marino n.d.).

Conclusion

Sri Lanka performs relatively well on international organisations' various indices, but these tend to focus on economically based factors. The reality for a large number of Sri Lankans, many of whom are women, is a daily struggle to provide the basic necessities for their families. Years of donor-controlled projects to increase economic activities indicate that there is no necessary relationship between economic liberalisation and increased economic growth, development, and reduced poverty levels. Governance is a key feature of any poverty reduction programmes, as development resources can be misused and thence not meet the needs of the people. Policies must go beyond the purely economic to focus on the needs of the disadvantaged. Sri Lankan women are still being left behind in societal and economic development, and further activities should therefore focus on social development activities that enable women to reach their full potential.

Western culture strongly dominates development paradigms, but alternative models have emerged in South Asia. The Sarvodaya movement of Sri Lanka has gained a strong foothold, and has developed into a successful NGO. It questions the values and goals of capitalism, and offers an alternative development model that seeks to promote self-reliance. Sarvodaya proposes that socio-economic development should fulfil ten basic human needs, and its ultimate goal is to promote spiritual enlightenment. It relies on the spirit of sacrifice and commitment by its members, but this thread also binds the members together, and a process of growing self-awareness of needs and capacities, recovering of self-dignity, and ultimately, spiritual development takes place within the community. We could learn more about ourselves by exploring Sarvodaya's teachings,

and a question that naturally arises is what our values are, and how these values are reflected in our society. In the case of gender equity, Western culture allegedly embraces equal opportunities, but this is not always the practice. Sarvodaya displays a holistic approach to gender issues, and even if their program does not explicitly discuss empowerment of women it is argued that the key to social change lies in every individual, and that all individuals are equal.

Microfinance has become an increasingly important part of Sarvodaya's equality and development principles, as the creation of savings and credit groups is the first step in achieving long-term socio-economic development. Poverty is associated with lack of access to, and control over, goods and services, productive resources, and income, and evidence suggests that microfinance can play a role in reducing poverty by increasing the income and consumption of poor households. Poverty also includes experiences of economic, political and social discrimination. MFIs empower local communities by providing financial services to disadvantaged people, who often fall outside traditional financial services. By working together to build their own organisations, people surmount a number of poverty issues, local development issues, and internal conflicts. However, without underestimating the value of microfinance, it should also be noted that the poorest segments of a society often are excluded from its opportunities as individuals living in extreme poverty lack even the most basic resources needed to participate in microfinance programmes. Consequently, it is not enough to merely proclaim Sarvodaya's principles of awakening and sharing. To better the situation for disadvantaged people, and especially women, Sarvodaya's principles have to be lived as well.

Endnote

(1) Cathrin Thodock, who was taught and inspired by the late Maggie Grey, received the Maggie Grey Humanitarian Award from the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, Bond University, in October 2005

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