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Point-Counterpoint

Sustainable livelihood in the era of globalisation: Does it make sense?

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The concept and framework for Sustainable Livelihood (SL) has emerged as a trajectory of thinking about poverty from income generation to multi-dimensional perspective. As a multi-dimensional approach or framework, SL is considered to have poverty reducing potentials and therefore, it has gained a prominent ground in the praxis and practice of current development efforts around the world. However, the actual potentials of SL approach can be hardly realised unless the approach is looked into from a historical perspective. Within the spectrum of history, there are also the undercurrents of political economy, which operates along the North-South divide. Indeed, the practice of SL approach has come into being in such a historical context where one of the most important path-breaking historical phenomena like globalisation has got hardly any attention. This has resulted in inconsistency between the norms encapsulated in the SL approach and the principles articulated in the globalisation process. In other words, the implications of globalisation and precisely the global forces have not been fitted in while applying SL approach in poverty eradication efforts. As a result of this missing link, the SL approach, which emerged out of a normative deal in the development arena, has not been able to address the poverty in a sustained way. I will explain hereunder in what historical context and in whose normative expectations the SL has failed to tackle poverty in the light of North-South relations.

The historical juncture: The movers and shakers

The historical profile indicates that the concept of SL first came into being as an official agenda in 1987 with the publication of a report of an advisory panel of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) entitled Food 2000, which was supported by the Brundtland Commission. Subsequently, this concept was brought to the wider audience and thus popularised by the work of various development institutes based in the north. Besides, the concept of SL was linked to various aspects of development in various contemporary global meets such as Social Summit, Rio Conference, Beijing Conference and so on so forth.

This historical account indicates that the movers of the concept of SL are the international development agencies, which are located in the north. One of the prime movers and shakers of SL is the Department for International Development (DFID) in the sense that its poverty reduction framework is widely accepted and practiced by the leading development agencies around the world. Another important aspect to note here is that the concept and practice of SL has evolved out of a

global socio-political process. To be more specific, the growth and development of SL has taken place in the era of globalisation. My interest is not to identify the historical juncture from the perspective of the place of origin or the movers and shakers of SL only, but I also attach value to globalisation phenomenon as the most important historical juncture here. Because, both SL and globalisation emerged as a normative value. In case of SL it carries normative value in the sense that the concern raised with SL under the caveat of sustainable development is meant for both northern and southern countries for the greater interest of both present generation as well as the generations to come. Similarly, globalisation is a norm because, a particular norm or ideology of what is called 'globalism' is very much inherent in it.

Whose norm counted? Endogenous versus exogenous question

The historical profile of SL approach/framework as discussed above supports the fact that the norm originated exogenously. This could be further substantiated with the value attached to SL by the 'definers'. I have already mentioned that the idea of SL has originated in the northern countries. Therefore, the northern people, while bringing the issue on board, defined it from the value of their own perspective -- the value that developing nations having faster growth of population have resulted in poverty and eventually threatened the sustainability of development efforts. This value judgment has led them to ascribe the norm that the developing nations should be concerned and accordingly be taught to practice the SL framework in order to eradicate their poverty in particular and to contribute to the overarching norm of sustainable development. This is how the SL as norm was exogenously given in the context of developing countries.

It is noteworthy that this exogenous norm did not come out from the northern countries because of lack of knowledge of the southern or developing countries about the sustainable livelihood. Rather, there had always been a concern for SL among the people in each society of developing or southern countries. In these countries, the people have been traditionally adopting various ways and means of their own living considering their own geo-social landscape. Given the resource base, the people used to mostly apply indigenous technical knowledge to sustain their living. Therefore, despite having endogenous concern for SL, the norm that the developing countries have been following is exogenously given. My question here is that if the exogenous paradigm of SL is considered to be excellent or viable in tackling poverty and sustaining livelihood of the common people, to what extent it has taken care of SL? Before dealing with this question, I would like to mention once again that the exogenous paradigm of SL norm should not be seen as an isolated historical juncture. Rather, the whole spectrum of globalisation process should be brought into the discussion. Because, the term globalisation contains a particular kind of norm which is exogenous to the developing countries. Besides, it is important to understand to what extent the norms of globalisation as exogenous one has taken care of SL norm.

Who takes care of sustainable livelihood? Localism versus globalism

As I indicated before, there had always been a concern for the livelihood at the local in particular and the southern or developing countries in general. This concern has developed 'localism' in that it is driven by the ideological orientation towards nurturing of knowledge

which is very much suited to their own geo-socio-political context. Alongside 'localism' there is also the existence of 'globalism' which is the carrier of exogenous norm. Now the point to ponder here is, to what extent 'globalism' as the carrier of exogenous norm has taken care of sustainable livelihood concerns within its purview of activities. Before that, it is important to understand the characteristics of 'globalism'. In functional term, 'globalism' is an ideology or 'ism' of 'globalisation', whereby the latter one is defined as the process of movement of capital, goods, people, ideas and images across national boundaries. At first instance, 'moving across national boundaries', being the defining character of globalisation encapsulates neo-liberal ideology and as part of this ideology the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) provide the following prescriptions: (i) opening of financial and capital accounts; (ii) removal of foreign exchange restrictions; (iii) cuts in public expenditures; (iv) balance budgets, lower corporate taxes; (v) deregulation of businesses; (vi) encouragement of foreign investment; and (vii) sell off public enterprises and secure private property monopolies under law.

Importantly enough, the ideology or norm of 'globalism' expressed in these prescriptions is promoted by broadly two actors, which are usually located in the north and oriented towards capital accumulation. These two actors or forces include the Transnational Corporations (TNCs) and inter-governmental organisations. Given this ideological or normative configuration of 'globalism', and the institutional support towards this end, it is difficult for local efforts to sustain with 'localism'. Because, 'globalism' carrying neo-liberal norm incapacitates the ethos of 'localism' by situating the state in such a position, which makes it less oriented towards internal demands. Besides, the state being locked into neo-liberal principles through agreements with various international institutions has to free the flow of capital and enshrine the transnational corporate rights as "national treatment". This contour of 'globalism', therefore, leaves with hardly any doubt that it does not take care of SL norm. Instead, it imposes the norm, which is exogenously imposed on the one hand and dismantles the initiative and the ideas generated by the community on the other. The following part will deal with how different carriers or actors of 'globalisation' dismantled the sustainable livelihoods of the people, precisely the poor.

Globalisation and its consequences on the poor: Does it make sense at all?

The globalisation process dismantles the SL strategies that the poor people adopt which has negative consequences on the poor. How this process adversely affects poor people of the developing countries could be understood better from three domains from which the SL emerged: (i) agriculture-centred perspectives; (ii) environment and natural resources perspectives and; (iii) the coping strategies perspectives.

In case of agriculture-centred perspectives, deregulation of business as one of the major threads of economic globalisation has resulted in negative consequences on the livelihood options of the poor. Within the broader spectrum of agriculture if we consider the aspect of food production, then the emergence and penetration of agriculture industries into developing countries under the aegis of globalisation becomes a great issue of concern. Because it does not only undermine the indigenous knowledge and practice of agriculture in these countries, the most crucial point is that the poor farmers loose

their control over the production process. The promotion of the marketing of Genetically Modified (GM) seeds and the expansion of GM cultivation by the Transnational Corporations (TNCs) under the aegis of globalization in general and the prescription of 'business deregulation' within the purview of 'globalism' in particular is a case in point. Although the production of GM food in Bangladesh is still under doubt, there is, however, a benefit of doubt. The important point to consider here is that the use of GM seed has vulnerability potentials irrespective of whether it is in use at present or not. From this perspective, adoption of GM seed is likely to have two-fold implications on the poor farmers: (i) they will not be able to reproduce seeds by themselves because, the GM seeds are terminator seeds; and (ii) they will be gradually dependent on seed industries for its terminating character and eventually will be unable to afford it. Consequently, the poor farmers will not be able to sustain their livelihoods that they have been maintaining traditionally.

With regard to environment and natural resources, although the above-mentioned prescriptions of neo-liberal globalism has no direct implications on the sustainability of livelihoods of the poor, the imposition of global/western knowledge as an overarching norm of globalization has much bearings upon them. The Flood Action Plan (FAP) and various water sector projects such as Coastal Embankment Project, Meghna Dhonagoda Irrigation Project (MDIP) in the context of Bangladesh and Narmada Dam Project in the context of India are the glaring examples in this regard. At first instance, the characteristic feature of all these projects was that they were construction dominated. Thus, having been construction dominated and driven by engineering criteria, the local knowledge was denied on the one hand in terms of both design and implementation. On the other hand, the global/western knowledge was imposed in the sense that capitalising on the engineering criteria, these projects employed foreign consultants who prioritised structural approach to the water sector problem over the traditional system of water management devised and maintained by the local people. As a result, these projects instead of deriving benefits to the poor, caused devastation in the environment and made their livelihood strategies vulnerable. In case of Coastal Embankment Project, the farmers of the project area belonging to the village *Beel Dakatia* had to shift their occupation from agriculture to fishing due to water-logging caused by these projects. This occupational shift has made livelihood of the workers unsustainable because the fishing sector is already thwarted.

The coping strategy as another domain of SL is also being affected by globalisation process. The aspect of coping strategy is more prominent in the urban area than rural area. The joining of women in the garment sector is a classical example of coping strategy of the households in the sense that given acute economic crisis, these women had to get involved in outside work in most cases to cope with this crisis in such a context where the household head is either absent or inactive. It is to be noted here that these women are exposed to a precarious employment condition because of the 'cheap labour' criteria set primarily by the employers and finally by the buyers. Now, the point to consider here is how the globalisation process adversely affects this coping strategy. It is well known to all that the Readymade Garment Sector (RMG) is now on the brink of phasing out of what is called Multi-fibre Arrangement (MFA) which will remove all the quotas under MFA and open market for all countries. This apparently indicates that the quota-free regime for the country like Bangladesh will not affect the sector and hence will not cause vulnerability to women workers, because it may have the capacity to

survive with its own competitive edge. But the problem is more with the non-tariff barriers than the quota restrictions, which will limit the access of LDCs, like Bangladesh, to global market.

Besides, the already existing weak backward and forward linkage of RMG sector in Bangladesh will not capacitate the sector to compete with even the regional competitors. Apart from that, the changing scenario of trade rules under the aegis of globalisation and its active forces like WTO offers bleak future for the future growth of RMG sector which will have implications on the livelihoods of women who have been coping with their household crisis at the moment. It should be specifically mentioned here that the global recession following 9/11 has already caused retrenchment of 3,50,000 garment workers who are experiencing livelihood crisis. Further shock, which is apprehensible from the existing and the new trade rules to come, will increase this number and consequently intensify vulnerability of the workers involved in the RMG sector. Not only that, livelihood crisis of these workers will have spiral effects on the livelihoods of other groups of people who have been involved with some sub-sectors which were developed for catering to the needs of these workers, particularly the women workers.

In conclusion, I would like to point to the fact that the poverty reducing potentials could be realised through application of SL if the principles or norms of globalisation expressed by what I have indicated as 'globalism' could be reconciled in such a way so that it becomes supportive of SL norm. But in real life situation, this has not happened and consequently the efforts towards poverty eradication made through SL approach have not carried any meaning to it.

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