

New Series: Grassroots Collaboration, AAI's approach

Part 1: Why grassroots today? – The significance of grassroots collaboration

Recently it has been pointed out that ‘participatory development’ and ‘development projects based on the real needs of local community’ are said to be necessary and to play a significant role in placing the local community at the centre of the development project and make sure they are the ones who benefit directly from the project. In this new series we would like to discuss one such participatory development method, grassroots collaboration, and report on how AAI is involved in this field.

What is often associated with the word ‘grassroots’ are NGOs, but we do not consider simply that ‘all NGOs equal grassroots’ or vice versa. Rather, we adopt a more ‘functional’ way of thinking. We take the ‘grassroots’ or ‘NGOs’ approaches as they are necessary, or if their ‘function’ is necessary, in order to achieve what we aim at. That is, both ‘grassroots’ and ‘NGOs’ are nothing but ‘means’ to achieve an end. If the objective of a project is clearly laid out, the necessary means will become self-evident without sticking to certain methods or forms of activities. We hope the current series of reports will provide some guidance and hints as to how to create new cases of grassroots development activity.

Needless to say, the goal of ‘participatory development’ is not simply to get local people involved in the project. The real meaning of ‘participatory development’ is to find a way for the local people to be independent from outside help and to be able to solve problems with their own ideas, resources and manpower. Therefore, what is needed for the project to be successful and sustainable is more than mere ‘involvement’. It is necessary that the local people actively lead the project while it is the outsiders who get involved in it under the local people’s initiatives.

What about the reality, though? In more or less all the developing countries the predominant attitude of the host country/community is to see money and hard equipment as the panacea to their current problems. In other words, however much we wanted to hear the local people’s opinions with the ‘grassroots’ ‘participatory’ approach, what ends up being presented to us are the sort of opinions, demands and suggested solutions which would necessitate hard aid from outside donors (i.e., “we need more funds, and more equipment...”). Host developing countries would seldom propose low-cost and realistic ideas that would be implemented within their own current capacity.

If the aim of ‘grassroots’ ‘participatory’ projects is ‘independent’, ‘self-supporting’ development (eventually) without reliance on any outside help, then this kind of (wishful) thinking on the part of developing countries needs to be reformed. After all, do the local people in developing countries have the independent thinking needed for this kind of development approach? That is the significant starting point. It is necessary for them to realize the significance of having their own ideas, and the joy of having their ideas being realized and embodied. However, such a process is hardly possible in a top-down system. Here at this point, an effective means to facilitate the bottom-up initiative from the development field would be to have foreign development assistants from the outside serving as catalysts, that is working with the ‘grassroots’ approach. Therefore, this can be considered as a ‘challenge to the top-down system.’

In the coming issues we will report on several cases of AAI’s grassroots collaboration in various developing countries, that took place in the past and are still on-going today. Then we hope to reflect upon the significance, tasks and future prospects of grassroots collaboration.