

Part 6: What is Development Study for? Switching the Mind to the Programmatic Approach

Through the past five articles of this series we have discussed the role, challenges and the future direction of development study based on our experiences gained thus far. Specifically, we have talked about (i) the need to shift from the 'hard' approach focusing on material construction to the 'soft' project approach aiming to build up systems/organizations with more flexibility, (ii) introduction of pilot study/project to verify the direction of community-led sustainable development activities and use of local resources, (iii) agricultural rural development study by way of PRA and PCM as participatory methods to properly understand the local needs, and the importance of opinion exchange among the survey team members, and (iv) the preliminary study which plays an important role in determining the direction of the development study which follows.

Now, what have we understood through such discussions? What we notice at the bottom line of the previous discussions is how important it is to dig out the real needs in the local community and consider the way to formulate/improve projects based on such needs. As stated at the beginning of this series, the purpose of development study is defined as "to support the establishment of the development plan of various public projects which are useful for the social and economic development of developing countries." However, after all, it should aim at fulfilling the need to improve livelihoods and the living environment of targeted local communities. Apart from development study, there are other schemes such as dispatch of experts, project type technical cooperation, training and provision of equipment, but what they aim at eventually is just the same.

In this series we have considered the role and challenges of development study, and discussed what development study can do to fulfill the local needs in an appropriate manner. To put it simply, up to now development studies always tended to be accompanied by a certain clear vision of 'output' even before the study started, and the data would be collected and analyzed and reports written to align with such pre-existing visions. However, as development projects are being 'softened' and the number of studies has been increasing to verify the effect of the projects, in recent years it is becoming difficult to draw up a 'blue print' with a clear vision of the study outcome beforehand. In such circumstances, the function and meaning of development studies should also be revised. In doing so it is important to go back to the basic question: "What is it for?" Needless to say, development study is just one means to achieve something. Development study should be used if it is proved to be the most effective method to achieve a certain goal, but if there are better means to achieve the same goal, there is no reason to stick to development study. In other words, the idea that development study is the only scheme should be discarded. Instead it should be seen as part of the programmatic approach which cannot be formulated within the framework of development studies alone. It should be offered along with other schemes while trying to find out what should be done in order to meet the needs of local people. And if development study is found to be the most desired scheme as a result it can be used with an expectation for the best performance. In applying development study, collaboration as incentive for local community participation, collaboration within the framework of partnership with the local community, and joint and participatory collaboration with no distinction between those supporting and supported, should be stressed. Probably it is high time to go back to the basic question of "What is it for?" not only in terms of development study but also of international cooperation and development aid themselves.

While it was not mentioned in the current series, the relationship between JICA and its consultants should also be discussed, as it should go beyond the mere contractual relationship and should work as equal partners in conducting development studies. Other issues which need to be discussed may include: request-based project implementation (some non-request-based systems are also being considered lately); and flexible application of technical staff and their specialized fields as well as budgets to meet various needs deriving from the increasing number of 'soft' projects.



Verification study by local people in Mauritania



Soil survey in Oman