

Background material for

Executive Secretary's Seminar Series

**Empowerment, Governance and Poverty
Eradication in South Asia:
*An agenda for action***

by

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**RETHINKING POVERTY ERADICATION IN
SOUTH ASIA: AN AGENDA FOR INCLUSIVE
DEVELOPMENT**

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Table of Contents

Preface

Acknowledgements

1. Poverty as Structural Injustice
2. Prevailing Poverty Alleviation Strategies: A Review
3. Promoting Agrarian Reform
4. Enhancing the Market Power of the Excluded
5. Democratising Educational Opportunities
6. Budgetary Policies for Poverty Eradication
7. Financial Policies for Poverty Eradication
8. Broadening ownership of assets
 - a. Opportunities for Collective Action
 - b. Institutions for Promoting Collective Action
9. The Political Economy of Structural Change

Bibliography

PREFACE

Poverty remains endemic across South Asia. In spite of some progress in every country in reducing the proportion of people living below the so called poverty line, South Asia remains home to the largest concentration of income poor people across the globe. Income poverty has been compounded by the growth of inequality and the widening of social disparities in every country regardless of its rate of growth and poverty reduction. Poverty and inequity compromise the character of our institutions of governance, thereby aggravating social tensions, as well as threatening the sustainability of our democratic process.

Studies on poverty in South Asia have a long and distinguished pedigree. Considerable work of both a conceptual and empirical nature has been undertaken on this subject at the academic and policymaking level. The governments of South Asia have commissioned volumes of work, some of which has been of considerable merit, to guide their policy interventions in the area of poverty reduction. The exercises underlying the preparation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), including the PRSP itself, as well as the background work to successive five years plans in India and other South Asia countries, has enriched the literature on poverty. Work by the international development agencies such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), UNDP, IFAD and other agencies, both at the global level and in work specific to particular South Asian countries, has made valuable contributions to the design of policy on poverty reduction. In recent years the reports of two Independent South Asian Commissions on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA), commissioned by two SAARC Summits, have contributed a regional perspective on poverty alleviation strategies.

In the light of this enormous body of literature on poverty in South Asia, it would be superfluous to put one more study on the table unless it had something distinctive to say on the subject. The ongoing work by Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) on poverty in South Asia, undertaken as part of the work programme of the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS), accordingly attempts to provide a somewhat different, though not necessarily an original, interpretation of poverty in South Asia. Our study is predicated on the proposition that the persistence of poverty and the

growth in inequality derives from the unjust nature of the social order which effectively excludes the resource poor from equitable opportunities for participating in the development process. Unless the structural injustices which underlie poverty can be corrected poverty will persist across South Asia. Our particular interpretation of poverty serves as our point of departure from most other policy interventions at the institutional level, both national and global aspiring to reduce poverty. Some of the interventions indicated in our work may have been episodically addressed, in one or another South Asia country within some programme, but no country, to our knowledge, has attempted to deal with poverty from the holistic perspective which informs our work.

In order to provide some understanding of the motivation underlying our work we have looked at the prevailing policy perspectives originating from international development institutions as well as from the governments of South Asia. It is our appreciation of the limitations in the policy agendas of these institutions and governments which has inspired our search for policy alternatives which can serve to induce some rethinking on poverty amongst policymakers in South Asia and within the global development community. We, however, aspire to project our ideas beyond the institutional players, to also reach out to political and civil society within South Asia, particularly to the constituencies of the excluded, who serve as the ultimate source of authority within a functioning democratic society.

Our work is structured under the following heads:

1. Poverty as Structural Injustice (The conceptual framework for the study).
2. The prevailing approach to poverty alleviation strategies:
 - a. The perspective of the international development community
 - b. Poverty alleviation strategies in South Asia

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