

Training for Rural Development Through Distance Education

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Distance Education is entering new areas of training which conventional education has, at the best, been able to enter only in a limited way. One of the goals of distance education in the developing world is National Development, and Rural Development is a major part of the task. Aslam outlines here the strategies for Rural Development through distance mode and argues that training programmes offered through this mode will effectively meet the training needs of a large number of personnel engaged in accomplishing a wide range of economic and social development projects in the developing countries.

INTRODUCTION

Determined efforts in development planning in Asia in recent years, paying increasing attention to the formulation of a large number of programmes/projects and making large investments of resources for rural development, have laid a promising base for economic and social development of the region. This can be strengthened by providing greater scope for training by making full use of modern sciences and technology through distance education and thus accelerate development.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

In the recent past, the integrated approach to rural development has rightly been given primacy in the development plans of most of the developing countries of Asia, which are characterised by high incidence of rural poverty. As a result, we witness, 'the spectacle of ever-growing search for meaningful and viable strategies for rural development — strategies that would help accelerate the rural development process and alleviate rural poverty' (CIRDAP 1984). Obviously, the choice of specific strategies for rural development in each country will depend on its social, political and economic conditions. However, common elements among the strategies adopted by various countries include generation of gainful employment opportunities; decentralization of the system of administration; integrated area development; strengthening of organizations of the poor; improving delivery mechanisms and promoting local level planning. It shows that integrated rural development adopts multi-faceted strategy in addressing the problems of rural development and that training can serve as a meaningful input in accelerating the process of rural development in these countries.

IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING IN IRD

With the adoption of integrated rural development (IRD) as a development strategy which requires a multi-disciplinary approach and involves multi-sectoral operation,

the need for training IRD functionaries also becomes manifest. Training has been recognized as a major input for facilitating development process, by creating awareness, improving skills and bringing about a change in attitudes. 'The purpose of training within rural development projects is to increase the performance of the staff to do specific jobs that they will be assigned' (Woods 1982). In the World Bank sponsored development projects too, training occupies a central role as one of the more important measures which can be taken towards achieving project objectives as has been very well stated in one of the central projects note: "No matter how technically sound the design of a project may be, it will not meet its objectives without effective direction, good management and presence of adequate number of *trained and motivated staff* at all levels of the organization. Training is not an end in itself, but is one of a number of closely-related personnel development actions, which when taken together, can produce desired improvement in job performance" (Central Projects Note 5.01 The World Bank). It implies that training per se is not an end in itself but a means to facilitate the realization of the objectives of any endeavour.

LACK OF IMPACT

In general, the experience of developing countries with the major development programmes, focussed on rural development, has not been very encouraging. Lessons drawn from experience suggest that the lack of impact of rural development efforts cannot be attributed only to the absence of political will or commitment or lack of funds, (Annual Report 1992-93), the problems often stems from the weakness of the supporting administrative system and their inability to involve people in the development process. The impact cannot be achieved by simply transferring sizeable inputs and capital resources into the rural economy; real impact is determined by how well development policies and programmes are directed towards rural people on multi-sectoral basis, in an integrated fashion, for a more equitable distribution of the benefits of development. It implies that a strong training component as a part of

overall strategy is needed to update knowledge, to reinforce existing skills, to add new skills, change attitudes and to create better awareness about the avenue for development.

NEED FOR A FRESH LOOK

The time has come when developing countries of this region must recognize the lack of meaningful impact of existing training interventions on the one hand and the importance of effective training on the other. Although, there is a vast network of training institutions in the developing countries of this region, the studies and surveys reveal that the training given by most of these institutions is inadequate (NIRD 1983). Research conducted by the UNDP Asia and Pacific Programme for Development Training and Communication Planning (DTCP) (Woods 1983), has also shown that much of the money put into training had little or no impact on improving job performance or the overall effectiveness of rural-based development projects. In fact, in some cases it is counter productive because traditional training often pulls crucial staff off their jobs for long periods of time, which the parent organizations can ill afford. The common experiences/inadequacies among others in most of the training institutions include the following major ones.

- i) The training institutions, particularly at sub-national levels are under-staffed and posting to a training institution is considered to be a punishment.
- ii) There are limited opportunities for training of trainers in training methodology. The few trained in developed countries find it difficult to apply the learnt methods and techniques in back-home situations.
- iii) The attendance in long-duration courses except induction training is not satisfactory. Most of the institutions, therefore conduct a large number of short-duration orientation programmes, which lack meaningful impact.
- iv) The cost of training is increasing day by day making it increasingly difficult for various agencies to sponsor candidates.
- v) The training programmes are not based on any scientific assessment of training needs, but on the perception of the training faculty based upon body of knowledge available, resulting into in-effectiveness of the training effort.
- vi) There is lack of clear-cut training policy; as a result, training receives low priority in development planning.
- vii) Training is considered a one-shot exercise rather than a continuous process.
- viii) Evaluation and follow-up does not receive serious consideration by the training institutions.
- ix) There is lack of interest among the training institutions to develop methodology for undertaking impact evaluation of the training programmes.

The analysis of the above and other related factors

reveal that there is a strong need not only to address ourselves to these problems but also to look out for alternative arrangements, which can effectively be applied as complementary training interventions for updating knowledge and skills of the vast number of development functionaries working in these countries. The distance mode of learning through its multi-media approach perhaps provides one such alternative, to complement and not to replace existing training arrangements.

DISTANCE EDUCATION APPROACH TO IRD TRAINING

Distance education as the basic approach in the Open University System in a number of developing countries of this region has acquired considerable significance in promoting both educational and professional well-being of the community through new communication technologies. There are well established Open Universities in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia and more recently the one established in Bangladesh. Most of them have already started offering professional programmes in the field of rural and agricultural development. In India, Indira Gandhi National Open University offers a study programme in rural development for development functionaries. It has also introduced rural development as one of the courses in its graduate programmes. The Sukothai Thammathirat Open University of Thailand conducts courses in agricultural extension and cooperatives, village administration and the land and property laws. The Allama Iqbal Open University of Pakistan organises functional education programmes in agricultural education, plant protection, soil problems, tractor repairs, poultry farming and vegetable growing. The Bangladesh Open University plans to conduct a diploma programme in agricultural extension. The Open University of Sri Lanka is planning to undertake a comprehensive project for rural community development through transfer of technology. These developments can be considered positive so far as the Open University System has started addressing the problems of rural development to facilitate development process in these countries. There is an urgent need not only to share these experiences but also to clearly identify a common strategy whereby distance education can be used to accelerate the process of development in these countries.

The Continuing Education Programmes under the Open University System are primarily concerned with broad personal and professional development. Therefore, Continuing Education has to respond to individual, organizational and societal needs. It is conceived as an intervention for change in one's professional and vocational knowledge or competence. The increasing trend towards vocationalism in Continuing Education including continuing professional education is inextricably tied to technological change. There is a need to ensure careful integration and application of new educational technologies into the learning environment. It is under the

banner of continuing education through the distance mode of learning that one can address oneself to the growing trained manpower needs in the rural development sector. The distance mode of learning not only provides increased flexibility but also has the ability to respond more readily to the emerging training needs to meet new demands. It has also the capacity to cover a large number of development functionaries without creating any physical dislocation from their workplace. The financial requirements are considerably low as compared to the conventional system of training. However, it has to be kept in mind that training through distance mode of learning has to play complementary and reinforcing role rather than a competitive or parallel one, in supporting and furthering training programmes offered by the existing training institutions.

FUNCTIONAL LINKAGE

Training is an important input in the achievement of the IRD goal. It enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of people at work for IRD programmes by enhancing their functional knowledge and skills and changing their attitudes for the accomplishment of responsibilities at a desirable level of performance. A training programme is specifically addressed to:

- a) improve and update professional knowledge
- b) develop skills and relevant know-how; and
- c) foster effective perceptions and attitudes towards work, fellow officials and the people.

On an average if a training institution conducts about 45-50 training programmes per year, with duration ranging from 1-3 weeks having about 20 participants per training programme, the physical output in terms of persons trained per year will be about 1000 participants. The content coverage of these programmes is expected to be equally shared by above knowledge, skills and attitude component, leaving skills components to be taken care of by the existing training institutions. These training institutions can then build up their training programmes around skills component and mainly reduce the duration of programmes and increase the number of programmes and participants threefold. As a result a training institution the output of which in terms of persons trained per year was 1000 can easily be increased to 3000 per year. This type of proposition provides a functional linkage between the existing training system and training through the distance mode of learning.

MAJOR AREAS OF TRAINING

There are two major areas of training in rural development, which can be addressed through the distance mode of learning. These include:

- i) Training of IRD Trainers
- ii) Training of Development Functionaries

i) Training of IRD Trainers

A. Justification

With the increasing emphasis on rural development, the availability of trained manpower with requisite orientation continues to be a major constraint in the proper execution of IRD programmes. Although a large number of training institutions have been established to serve the varied and emergent training needs of the development functionaries, facilities for training of trainers are scanty and not always available to a large number of trainers (Aslam 1987). The analysis of a number of training documents of national, international and other organizations reveal that the trainers of IRD either:

- a) have been trained in the methodology and process of one or the other aspect of rural development like local level planning, project analysis, agricultural extension, monitoring and evaluation of development projects, and rural marketing etc. or
- b) have been participating in various Seminars/Workshops conducted by other institutions on various aspects of rural development, or
- c) have been involved in preparation of reading materials for use in particular training courses.

From the above it is evident that one part of the IRD trainer's job as a subject matter specialist is being well attended to. However, it is equally, if not more important, to equip the trainer with pedagogic skills.

Not only are training facilities in training methodology scanty but also the availability of these facilities get lessened in face of the large number of trainers serving in various training institutions at sub-national levels. Huge amounts have been spent in strengthening infrastructure and other training facilities in these institutions. The maximum utilization of these facilities is possible only if urgent attention is paid to enhance the planning and implementation capabilities of the trainers engaged in organizing rural development training programmes.

B. Objective and Content Coverage

Objective

The main objective of programmes will be to orient and augment the knowledge of trainers with regard to application of a systematic approach in designing and conducting need based training programmes for their respective development functionaries.

Content Coverage

The effectiveness of any training of trainers (TOT) programme depends largely on how carefully they are designed, managed and followed up. It is also necessary not only to adhere to the required steps, procedures and methods but also to their adequate understanding by the people concerned. A TOT programme originates with the assessment of needs and concludes with its fulfilments.

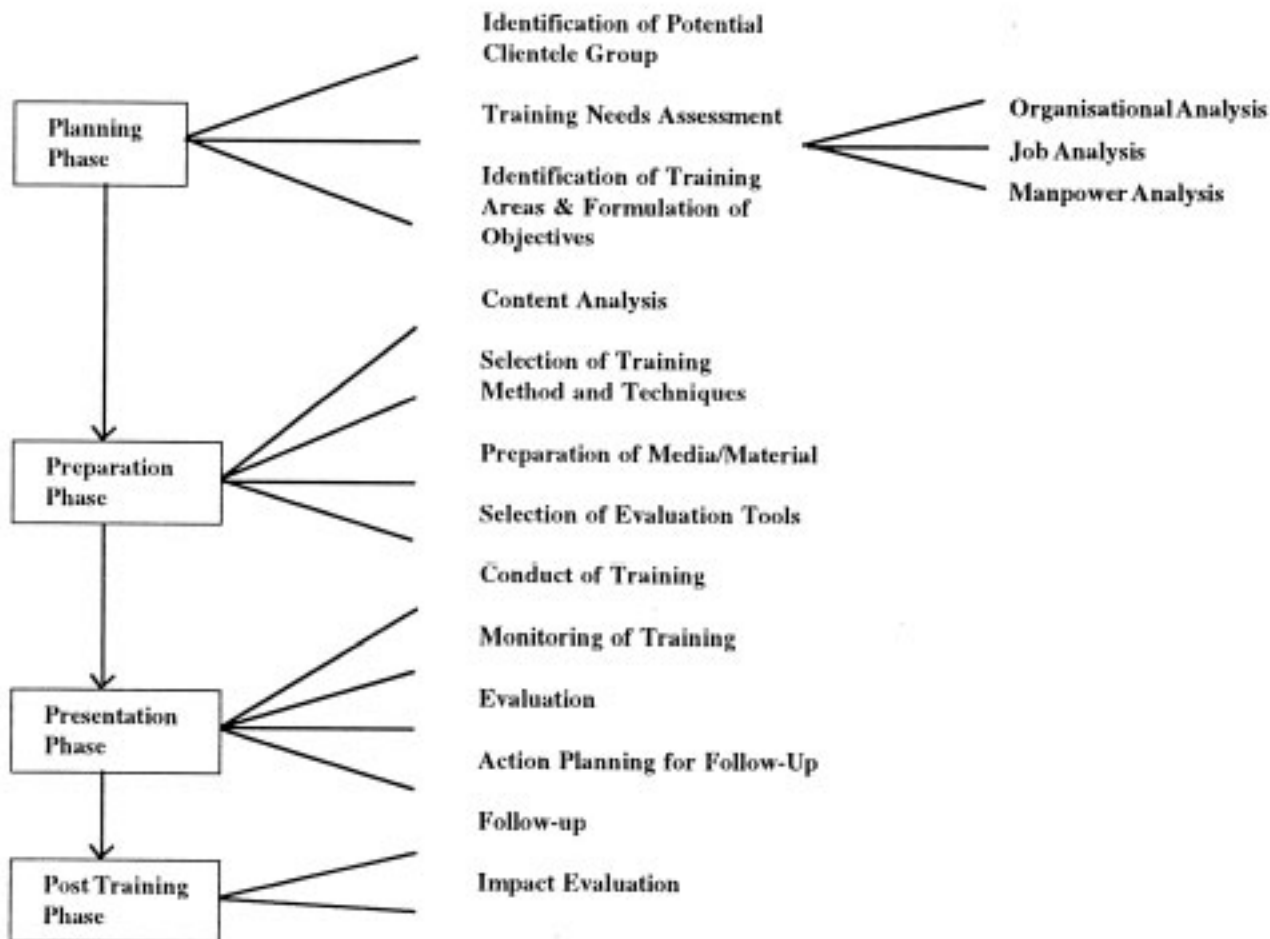


Fig. 1 : The Training Process

Follow-up and impact serves as a sequential aftermath to the completion of the programme. It is therefore, necessary that a trainer is exposed to the training process in its totality which involves various phases as shown in Fig. 1. The role of a trainer is an important aspect in the whole process of training. A trainer not only needs the knowledge and skills demanded by the roles but also adaptability and a special awareness. It is therefore necessary that such training programmes also provide a scope for role analysis of trainers in terms of knowledge, skill and attitude requirements. A modular treatment backed up by multi-media packages will suit best to this type of programme development. For the developing countries of this region, where open universities have been established, initiative can be taken up by the *Staff Training and Research Institution of Distance Education (STRIDE)* established at the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India and intended to cover developing countries through its training and research activities.

C. Target Group

As the programme is expected to deal with design, development and management of IRD training, it will be useful for trainers in general but more specifically for trainers imparting training to rural development

functionaries at different levels. These may include:

- i) Trainers in the institutions engaged in rural development training.
- ii) Functionaries, particularly IRD and front line extension workers (like rural development supervisors, agriculture officers, extension agents etc) of various organizations which deal with training of rural people.
- iii) Trainers in general.

ii) Training of Development Functionaries

A. Justification

The lack of impact of training programmes among other things is also closely associated with the degree of motivation. The task of promoting motivation at the grass roots level or to develop a firm belief in rural people's capacity to be the instruments of their own development, requires a strong commitment to the interest of the people by the development workers be they extension workers at the local level or managers or supervisors at higher levels. In the present circumstances, it is difficult to identify those development workers who are well trained and dedicated to perform such a task. Ministries and agencies involved in the delivery of services for rural development

are numerous. This has created a state of confusion as to who are rural development workers and who are not (Aslam 1993). For example, rural development needs to be differentiated from agriculture and subjects allied to it. Although agriculture is the primary occupation in the rural areas, yet the basic strategy of rural development is not merely the promotion of agriculture in the technical sense, but its development in such a manner so that fruits of development reach intended beneficiaries. The strategy is also to divert as much as possible, a large mass of people (owing to scarcity of land) away from agriculture to non-farm occupations. Rural Development encompasses activities other than economic activities like education, health, nutrition, rural industries etc. This multi-sectoral operation needs development functionaries, who have been exposed to the integral view of rural development and trained to work in a coordinated manner.

The openness of the distance education system and its capacity to reach large numbers of learners with instructional packages of high standard, providing a balanced mix of knowledge, understanding and skills, can go a long way in meeting training needs of large numbers of functionaries whose options for professional development are limited only to the short duration inservice training opportunities.

B. Objective and Content Coverage

The main objective of this type of programme of study can be to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of development functionaries by enhancing their functional knowledge, foster effective perceptions to work, in a coordinated manner towards integrated rural development. The content coverage of this study programme will be largely determined by the consideration as to whether such a study programme is taken up at regional or country level. The analysis of the rationale for undertaking integrated rural development (IRD) or IRD type programmes in the South and South-East Asian countries reveals that although IRD programme content and its evolution vary from country to country, the major thrust of all the programmes is the alleviation of rural poverty. Similarly major strategies adopted by these countries directed towards accelerating rural development process and alleviation of rural poverty have common elements, which can be helpful in developing a common programme design. In fact, the experiences of these countries with various strategies adopted, themselves provide great scope for mutual learning.

Thus the content coverage of such a programme of study can be subjected to both regional as well as country specific treatment. The regional component of the programme will address itself to those areas which are based on the common strategies adopted by most of the countries to accelerate the rural development process and alleviate rural poverty including the conceptual framework for IRD. The major content areas which need to

be addressed through regional component of the study programme may include:

- i) IRD Concept and Rationale
- ii) Economic vs Social Development
- iii) Local Level Planning
- iv) Strengthening Organizations of the Poor
- v) Integrated Area Development
- vi) Decentralization of the System of Administration
- vii) Effective Delivery Mechanism for Rural Development

At present the programmes of study in rural development and allied subjects developed and offered by the Open Universities in South and South-East Asia are based on country specific experiences with little relevance to other countries. As a result these programmes have become country specific unlike management programmes which have shown great market potential among the developing countries. The responsibility of developing the regional component of the study programme has to be given to one of the Open Universities which could work in collaboration with other Open Universities in the participating countries. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) which is engaged in strengthening national open universities can play an effective role in fostering such regional programme development.

It is to regional programme component that each national open university may add country specific modules to make it more relevant to their respective countries. Such a country specific component may be based on emerging training needs. For example, in India, the recent 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act for Panchayati Raj can be considered a bold step towards decentralization of policies and programmes in rural development. It has thrown open a big challenge for development planners to immediately devise a strategy for the training of Panchayati Raj functionaries. In a country like India where there are 2,17,300 Gram Panchayats, 4525 block Panchayat Samitis and 330 Zilla Parishads, it is almost an impossible task for the conventional training system to meet such a big challenge of training large number of Panchayat functionaries. Keeping in view the dimensions of the problem and the number of elected/to be elected Panchayati Raj functionaries to be trained, the distance education seems to be the only viable alternative. The Panchayati Raj institutions to be vibrant instruments of local self-Government need adequately trained manpower. Any delay is bound to have negative implications on the system as a whole. Some of the major content areas for example, which perhaps qualify for immediate attention through country specific modules on Panchayati Raj in India may include:

- i) Structure, function and process of decentralization through Panchayati Raj
- ii) Coordination/delegation of powers
- iii) People's participation in planning, implementation and monitoring of development activities.

iv) Resource mobilization and utilization

There may be similar country specific problems demanding urgent attention in other countries as well, which can be addressed through this study programme by the respective Open Universities. These country specific modules can be at a later stage even exchange among the participating countries to foster exchange of experience for their mutual benefit.

C. Target Group

The specific target group for such a programme will vary from country to country. In general, the programme will be useful for development functionaries working directly or indirectly in the field of rural development, particularly those who are responsible for implementation of IRD programmes at various levels.

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