

Tackling Poverty

Global poverty continues to grow, with about 90 per cent of the world's 1.3 billion poor living in rural areas. Poor food supplies and malnutrition are inextricably linked with poverty, and about 70 per cent of poor people are women. The lack of opportunity and employment in rural areas is also having an impact on urban communities, with the rise in migration to the cities. However, it is projected that the size of rural communities will continue to outstrip that of urban communities, at least until the year 2020.

The Commonwealth continues to be deeply concerned about poverty – about half the world's poor live in its member countries. In 1993, Heads of Government called for decisive action against poverty, stressing that problems of poverty and food insecurity were interrelated. At the 1995 summit, the Heads established sustainable development as one of the three platforms for action under the Millbrook Action Programme on the Harare Declaration. In doing so, they gave added weight to the task of addressing food insecurity, alleviating poverty and accelerating rural development.

The commitment to assist members in their efforts to reduce poverty is reflected in all activities of the Secretariat. Broadly, these activities work towards creating an economic environment which is conducive to

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Specifically, the Secretariat helps member countries by:

- ✦ encouraging policies leading to long-term economic growth;
- ✦ developing food security policies which include specific action to alleviate poverty among women;
- ✦ improving the agriculture sector so that incomes will increase for people working in that sector;
- ✦ introducing self-help programmes, such as rural credit and micro-lending schemes for small-scale enterprise development;
- ✦ improving, for example through education and training, the ability of a country in policy development; and
- ✦ pursuing macroeconomic stability and attracting investment.

A Commonwealth Poverty Initiative was launched in 1996 and a report entitled *Practical Mechanisms for Poverty Reduction* was prepared by consultants and used as the basis for a workshop held in Arusha, Tanzania in November 1996. The five Commonwealth countries which met in Arusha – Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda – agreed that improved agriculture was essential if rural poverty was to be reduced.

The Secretariat also commissioned country reports from Botswana, Ghana, Malawi, Uganda and Zimbabwe on their experiences in building gender considerations into food policy-making. A *Handbook on Incorporating Gender into Food Security Policies* was produced for Africa in consultation with the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the World Food Programme and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). As part of his presentation to the World Food Summit in November 1996, the Secretary-General drew attention to the handbook, which has been distributed widely within governments in African member countries as well as to the international community. It has already been used by UNIFEM in a 1996 workshop for training SADC gender contact points, and a further SADC request has been received for its use later this year in a training of trainers course on food security, organised in collaboration with the University of Namibia.

The search for increased agricultural production is set against a very rapidly changing scene, especially in Africa, as World Bank/International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programmes attempt to turn around fragile economies. Among other things, these programmes require the withdrawal of government from a number of traditional service areas and encourage the privatisation and commercialisation of government services. There is pressure therefore to reduce the role of government agencies in areas such as research and extension, credit provision, and farmers' organisations, while at the same time seeking to promote agriculture so as to improve the livelihoods of millions of poor farmers.

The response to this dilemma in Africa can take a number of forms and Secretariat assistance is available in all areas.

First, there is a move to look beyond government to the private sector to take up where government services have been withdrawn in the agriculture sector. Areas such as seed production and distribution, veterinary services and agricultural education are candidates for this process of private finance or at least cost-recovery. Technical assistance arranged by the Secretariat, especially in relation to the dairy industries in Africa and the Caribbean, has provided governments with advice and the documentation to approach the private sector with realistic plans.



Working in the food sector

Among successful projects undertaken between 1995 and 1997 are the Smallholder Dairy Development project in Zimbabwe, which provided technical assistance to prepare a five-year development plan for small dairy farmers, and the Dairy Industry Development project in Jamaica, which prepared a strategy for rehabilitating the dairy industry.

Second, there is a move to overcome the mistrust often found between NGOs and governments and search for active partnership arrangements between them. Secretariat programmes already address capacity-building in the NGO sector and this will become a key ingredient of future activities in poverty alleviation.

Third, there is an increasing realisation that the market has been long neglected and that access to a cash income is a potent force in rural development. Funding from the Secretariat has strongly supported efforts at local level to engage government and NGO workers in new approaches to agricultural extension, by moving towards what are now termed participatory rural action programmes, which recognise the importance of marketable produce.

Finally, there are substantial numbers of farmers and herdsmen, perhaps still the majority in Africa, working at the margins of subsistence. Any meaningful poverty programmes will need to target these groups, which include the landless, many female-headed households, pastoralists and communities displaced by civil strife. Expensive food security nets will continue to be necessary to protect these disadvantaged groups. Deepening community structures such as self-help groups and supporting NGO activities will remain primary Commonwealth concerns.