

## ***Book Review***

*Pro-Poor Growth and Governance in South Asia: Decentralization and Participatory Development*, Edited by Poona Wignaraja and Susil Sirivardana, Published by SAGE Publications, New Delhi/ Thousand Oaks/ London, 2004; ISBN: 81-7829-257-0 (India - Hb) pps 459.

In the Forward of this book, Gowher Rizvi states that the present volume makes its particular contribution in recognising that the governance agenda, with an emphasis on participatory development, can be combined with systematic decentralisation of power and resources to the grassroots in order to lay the basis for sustained poverty reduction. The key to this process is community mobilisation through social movements and non-governmental development organisations that can catalyse changes in the conditions of the poor. He goes on to say, "Decentralization without social mobilization creates scope for vested local interests to monopolize power and resources to their advantage". Also, Rizvi underlines the fact that social movements and organisations representing the poor can challenge the monopolisation of power and resources by officials and politically dominant groups and affect lasting social change and devolution of resources in a manner that is both democratic and reduces poverty.

This book probes some of the positive elements on which a manageable national and regional social transition in South Asia can be built, and identifies ways in which people and states are attempting to re-connect with South Asia's 'civilisational rhymes', using those positive elements. The book builds on three positive core elements that have emerged so far. They are:

- i. The efficiency of the poor, whose creativity can contribute directly to pro-poor growth, through an accumulation process where the pattern of growth, human development and equity are not trade-offs. The strategic option is based on a different pattern of growth, and not on re-distributive justice, which starts with the poor as subjects, not merely labourers or objects.
- ii. The attempt at re-orientating decentralisation reforms, in relation to participatory development and democracy. What is called for is devolution not merely decentralisation.
- iii. The holistic approach and paradigm shift involved in cost effectively eradicating the worst forms of poverty, which can be a catalyst for good governance and help mediate the antagonistic contradictions, through this holistic strategic approach, in a given time frame.

The analysis and conclusions in this book are completely different from conventional thinking and action on development and democracy and can help close major gaps in the intellectual discourse, as well as give greater coherence to micro-macro policy and practice. This kind of interdisciplinary macro-micro analysis does not currently exist.

Part I of the book has a brief introduction and conceptual framework. Part II consists of six case studies selected from locations in India (Kerala and Gujarat), Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, that demonstrate different models but with commonalities and differences of the link between pro-poor growth, decentralisation reforms and poverty eradication, which can lead to good governance process and practices. These cases cover both rural and urban experiences. All the essays show a movement towards the participatory paradigm and the establishment of innovative partnerships among political and development actors. Part III draws some critical lessons from these illustrative cases for value driven macro-micro policy, which can support and re-enforce the processes and practices, both short-term and long-term, which are being rooted on the ground. In the concluding part of this book, the key lessons for macro and micro policy have been "unambiguously" drawn. It is to enhance the understanding of some of these critical elements in the alternative paradigm of good governance and pro-poor growth-oriented poverty eradication that the authors have probed the link between decentralisation reforms and pro-poor growth in six socio-political locations in five South Asian countries. In the case studies an attempt has been made to go beyond decentralisation as such, and look at attempts at real devolution and empowerment of the poor and to go beyond welfare, delivery and redistributive justice to a more sustainable transitional pro-poor growth strategy and also see the linkages between the two. These core macro-micro policy options articulate the paradigm shift and a new South Asian school of thought.

Among the lessons for macro policy are:

1. A paradigm shift to participatory development and democracy is possible;
2. Integrating pro-poor growth and decentralisation reforms are important - decentralisation by itself is not sufficient;
3. It is important to build new partnerships and to carve a new social contract - a partnership for self reliance;

Among the micro policy lessons are:

4. It is important to build sustainable organisations of the poor as a core methodology of rigorous social mobilisation;
5. It is important to have pro-poor growth and a new accumulation process at the local level and welfare alone is not sufficient - this should include efficiency of the poor as a basis for pro-poor growth and should include a new accumulation process which is aimed at the poor;
6. It is important to strategise in order to meet the challenge of transforming the base from dependence to self-reliance - notably, women led pro-poor growth is more self-reliant.

The editors sum up the conclusion with, "The conclusion is inescapable that these lessons for policy in strategising to meet the challenge of eradication of the worst forms of poverty transforming the base of society are compelling. The experimental and material basis for it is in place". They go on to state, "The process can be further deepened by continuously probing the reality, raising the consciousness of the poor, putting in place supportive macro framework conditions, and identifying further feasible macro-micro policy choices".

The book makes interesting and intensive reading. The case studies are an insight to how pro-poor empowerment works and is sustainable in different communities in different South Asian countries. Apart from being a wonderful attempt in cooperation between South Asian writers, economists and thinkers, it is also a very good and brave attempt to give a new mode of thinking for pro-poor growth that is sustainable. The words "pro-poor growth and no welfare" and "macro-micro policy" are used very efficiently and appropriately in the background of the case studies and give a brave direction on the part of the authors for future development thinkers on how to go about governance, growth and policy which is not only pro-poor but also poor-led and is sustainable in the South Asian context. Much of the book is also material for academic debate and therefore also a step in the right direction.