

Concept Note

Rural Revitalization, Youth and Social Entrepreneurship Platform

I. Context

Asia history and profile. Based on archeological data, it is estimated that humans inhabited Asia a million years ago. Agrarian communities in the region relied on an economy of surplus crop cultivation and coastal trading of domestic products. In the sixteenth century, European powers colonized and developed the region, profiting from the region's natural and economic wealth. Within this period, commercial agriculture and export activities grew rapidly. Demographic changes also resulted from migration required by a heightened demand for labor.

The peoples of Asia have adapted to their own respective environments in different ways. In the premodern era, some nomadic groups lived in boats; others moved around in the deep forests as hunters and gatherers. Others planted rice in areas with fertile lands or fished along coastal zones.

Farming and fishing practices were artisanal, small-scale, family-based, and aimed at household and community level food security. Agriculture, cultural practices, as well as faith and spiritual beliefs were intertwined in the individual's and community's daily life. Thus, planting technologies considered sufficient food production and nourishment of natural resources such as soil, water, and wild living organisms. An example is rice terracing which was developed by different peoples in different parts of Asia such as in China, Philippines, and Thailand.

Asia is home to over 4.5 billion people, or about 60 percent of the world's total population. With 49 nations, the region is the largest continental economy and the most rapidly growing economy. (This is expected to increase to over 5.1 billion by 2050.)

Before the Second World War, a large part of Asia was colonized mainly by European powers. Trading was conducted among countries within the region, with Europe, and the Americas.

After the World Wars, there remained political unrest as authoritarian regimes arose in many Asian countries. Insurgency and resistance developed strongly across rural communities and mobilized youth and farmers in armed resistance. Land was highly contested and the rural areas continued to be a place for conflict.

Changes and challenges. In the rural areas of Asian countries, agriculture is the main economic activity that ensures food security. Over the decades, the share of agriculture to gross domestic product (GDP) in all countries has decreased due to economic transformation, even while a majority of the region's populations continue to rely on agriculture for survival and economic growth.

“Agriculture has undergone its own structural transformation with increasing shares of high-value crops in response to changing diets and export opportunities. Its capital intensity has increased at a rapid pace and so has the intensity with which it uses agrochemicals and water resources. Rural households are unquestionably deriving less than half of their income from farming and for the poorest households that percentage is even less; in fact, non-farm employment has grown across all Asia, a welcome development, particularly in South Asia, in the face of the reduced capacity of industry and services to offer jobs to the growing numbers of young people.” (An Outlook on Asia’s Agricultural and Rural Transformation: Prospects and options for making it an inclusive and sustainable one, IFAD, 2019)

Rice is the dominant staple food and is produced by hundreds of millions of smallholder men and women farmers and landless farmworkers who depend on rice production for food, income, and employment. Rice is also deeply integrated in the socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions of rural life. Other food sources include a diversity of other food crops such as root crops, herbs, vegetables, fruits, fish, poultry and livestock, as well as wild fruits and animals found in forests and jungles.

In the last four to five decades, farming systems and practices in the region exhibited important changes:

- Intensified commercialization and capitalization of farms
- Increased crop diversification
- Specialized individual farms (cropping, aquaculture, poultry, livestock, herbs)
- Farmers’ shift from traditional and local farm inputs (human labor, family and community labor exchange, draft animals, animal manure) to commercially acquired inputs (farm equipment, paid labor, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, molluscicides)
- Decrease in size of farm holding; concentration of large farms into commercial agribusinesses and private corporations

In recent times, there has been a blurring of rural-urban divide brought about by new information and communication technologies, social and mass media, and improved infrastructure in the countryside, also bring about changes in the lifestyle, traits, and customs of rural residents. Rural and urban transformations expressed in agrarian transition and urban sprawl occur as simultaneous, interrelated, and multidimensional processes. The region’s rural and agricultural sector continues to experience major challenges:

- Outmigration of labor from the agricultural sector into non-farm pursuits such as trade, the hospitality industry, manufacturing, and health care, resulting to labor growth that is higher than land productivity growth. Still, agricultural production remains to be an important source of food and nutrition for the region’s populations.

- Agricultural modernization that, while being a key factor in the development of the nations, has resulted in the ecological degradation of lands, water, and forests of which SEA has been historically wealthy. Agricultural intensification (Green Revolution) that transitioned small and subsistence farming to large commercial agriculture contributed to increased productivity of land and labor and also caused cultural, economic, and environmental effects.
- Intensifying migration flows that have altered agrarian communities in Southeast Asia with new forms of livelihood and remittance inflows but also changes in gender identities, stretching of the household and the villages across long overseas distances, lifestyle and consumption changes, and ethnic identity and citizenship issues, among many others.
- Climate-induced migration is a growing phenomenon brought about by storms, flooding, temperature increases, sea-level rise, and other climate change events and impacts that cause temporary or long-term displacement of individuals and families in the region. As the region continues to be extremely vulnerable to environmental risks and high population density, it may encounter large-scale population displacements in the near future.
- In countries and zones where population is still growing, rural populations may also grow in density, result in the decrease in average farm holding, and impose on farmers the decision to engage in off-farm livelihoods.
- Multiple roles of poor rural women in rice-based farming systems as unpaid family workers, paid farmworkers, wage or income earners, household budget managers, and main major caretakers of family health and nutrition. Gender roles in Asia vary by region, agro-ecological system, type of farming systems, crops grown, interlinks with livestock and fish production, and opportunities for off-farm occupation for family members. Female participation increases with poverty and in unfavorable rice environments.
- Environmental degradation of renewable and non-renewable resources, especially for the poor for whom the degradation of natural resources (e.g., water, soil fertility, wildlife) will further their poverty situation and ecological, natural, and health hazards (e.g., animal diseases, pandemics).
- Issues of inequitable access to and distribution of land and other natural resources leading to conflicts and peasant and women organizing and engagement with public and private sectors
- Increase in agribusiness and contract farming from the 1990s and a decrease in the relevance of agricultural labor as a source of income. Farming families have changed as some members engage in seasonal agricultural labor or work more often in off-farm livelihoods that are usually in the town centers or cities. Rural off-farm livelihoods occur near or within cities and urbanizing areas.
- Interrelationship of urbanization on agricultural food systems and supply chains, effecting new forms of off-farm employment especially in post-harvest, processing and distribution/trading services
- Increased domestic and global interconnectivity of physically distant rural communities

- With changes in agriculture, most rural youth are engaged in employment outside of agriculture in the last 4 decades producing an alarming trend of aging farmers.
- Most of the rural youth are part of the informal economy, typically earning low incomes and are employed under contractual or casual work, exposing them to precarious working condition. They either become family workers, small-scale farmers, micro-entrepreneurs or unskilled laborers. For these reasons, they are compelled to migrate to urban areas.
- Asian rural youth confront various development issues: access to quality education; transition between education and employment; access to adequate healthcare hampered by economic, social and, at times, legal barriers; lack of participation in the creation of development policies; migration; access to land and farm technologies; access to financial services and other enterprise support.
- Intensification and increase in frequency of climate change or extreme weather events such as heat waves, droughts, floods and tropical cyclones in recent decades, aggravating shortage of water, affecting agriculture, tourism and fishing, challenging food security, triggering fires in forests and destruction of coastal zones, and worsening risks on human health.

On the whole, profound changes in the region have taken place at the expense of rural development with the heaviest toll on farmers, landless agricultural workers, fishers and indigenous communities. This has created generations of youth who want to escape the poverty and underdevelopment of the rural areas by migrating to the urban centers and other countries in search of better opportunities. These general trajectories of change have been aptly characterized by various scholars of rural development as quoted below:

“The general trajectories of change in the region are exemplified by the increasing market integration of rural production into the national and global economy, the diversification of rural livelihoods, changing mobility and migration patterns and ongoing processes of industrialization and urbanization. Rural populations’ responses to these profound changes in the worlds that they live in vary greatly – ranging from hidden forms of everyday resistance to organised protest movements.” (Agrarian Angst, Caouette and Turner, 2011)

“A closer look at the production pipeline should reveal to us that those who grow our food usually suffer a double whammy. At the head, there’s the high cost of land, water, seeds, farm machineries, interests on credit, etc. At the tail end, there’s the pricing down at the farm gate, the high costs of storage or bringing the produce to the market.

“The ‘cheapness’ of rural is neither friendly to the producer or to the environment. It breeds further intensification of production per unit of land with no assurance of increased income. Likewise, poor municipal fishers are forced to over fish already depleted fishing zones. Meanwhile, rich and urban consumers, the non-agricultural sectors, enjoy relatively cheap prices that discount both rural labor and the land, water, forest resources.

“The strategy of accelerating growth in the countrysides could worsen rural poverty. Hooking rural areas to the globalization process undermines self-reliance and self-sufficiency and makes local communities more dependent on the global trading system. This also means extending, instead of shortening, the “food miles”, thereby increasing the carbon footprint of agriculture.” (Serrano, 2010)

All these indicate that rural development should not be business-as-usual but should shift to sustainable rural development – development that balances the economic, social, political, cultural and ecological dimensions in an inclusive and integrated way.

The COVID-19 pandemic: During and as a result of the Covid19 pandemic, the lives, livelihoods and food systems of Asian peoples continue to be threatened, involving small holder cultivators, fishers, farmworkers, food processors, retailers, and consumers. Even as panic buying has gradually eased and with the experience of quarantines and lockdowns, there is a heightened recognition of the critical importance of sustaining food and agricultural supply chains, livelihoods, and cash availability. The pandemic also ushered in a renewed interest in farming or food production even in the urban communities.

When the whole world felt the serious effects of the Covid19 pandemic, short- and long-term responses were initiated by both public and private sectors at the local, national, regional and international arenas. In these efforts, the most vulnerable communities and sectors were prioritized; immediate relief was delivered to a certain extent. Quarantine and other health protection policies constrained mobility and travel, economic activity and exchange, social interaction and family gatherings, schooling and educational activities. There were also abrupt changes in civil society action and political campaigns.

After two years, the effects of the pandemic and policies to address it further highlighted the unbalanced economic, social, and cultural relationships between and among rural and urban communities in each region, in each country. Several human survival activities that were threatened by the crisis demonstrated the crucial links between communities. These included economic value chains in food production to distribution and consumption; trading and exchange of goods (e.g., food staples, essential commodities, medicines, water) and services; transportation by land, water and air; and others.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the climate crisis and geo-political armed conflicts have exacerbated poverty and inequality in developing countries in the region. In 22 developing countries in East Asia and the Pacific, the World Bank estimated that poverty has increased from 259 million in 2019 to 264 million in 2020 and increased further to 266 million in 2021 (World Bank, 2021). With more than 33% of people living in extreme poverty globally residing in South Asia, the poverty and inequality situation in the Asia-Pacific region is even bleaker. Many studies have shown how poverty is much worse among rural populations. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the vulnerability of both rural and urban

communities to corporate-controlled global food systems and the importance of rural development as a pillar for assuring food security and building resilience of communities to pandemics and disasters. All these have catalyzed a rethinking of strategies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the 17 aspirations to overcome humanity's greatest challenges by 2030. This is well articulated in the UNDESA Report on Reconsidering Rural Development that posits the importance of addressing the urban-rural divide and the need to give due regard to agriculture and rural development as a critical pillar in achieving the SDGs.

Development activism among the youth

In the face of all these, and even before the pandemic, emerging strands of development activism among the youth have emerged. Some youth from urban centers have opted to immerse in rural areas and get involved as development workers of various local, national and international non-government development organizations or as interns and participants of university outreach programs in the rural areas. There are also youth espousing and practicing agriculture that conserves and nurtures ecological wealth – a journey that values the traditional and cultural wisdom that does not take away natural wealth but instead knows how to bring nature back to nature in richer form.

Another strand of youth development activism is social entrepreneurship that places equal value to people, planet, profit, prosperity, and peace. The global phenomenon of social entrepreneurship that is concerned with innovative solutions to social problems has been well documented in Asia, with social enterprises engaging the poor and marginalized as primary stakeholders as a major expression in developing countries. (Dacanay, 2019; ISEA, 2015). A good number of these social-mission driven enterprise models that are led by young social entrepreneurs and innovators have been shown to uplift the lives of farmers, agricultural workers, indigenous communities and the women and youth of these sectors.

These strands of development activism have complemented the more usual forms of protest and resistance in response to trajectories of change in the region that are taking a toll on the poor in rural communities and the environment that sustains their lives and livelihoods.

II. The RR, Youth and SE Platform

This platform on Rural Revitalization, Youth and Social Entrepreneurship (RR, Youth and SE) is one of 5 social entrepreneurship platforms for inclusive recovery, building back fairer and accelerating the Sustainable Development Goals that were initiated by members and partners of the Institute for Social Entrepreneurship in Asia (ISEA) and the Social and Community Enterprise Constituency of the Asia-Pacific Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (SCE-APRCSEM) in a conference co-convened with UNESCAP in September 2020.

The RR, Youth and SE Platform aims to make a contribution in bringing rural development practice and policy in the Asian region into a sustainable and resilient path, **as a contribution to reimagining rural development in the 21st century**. Toward this end, the platform intends to

- Serve as a platform for learning exchange on RR, Youth and SE
- Project collective impact on marginalized sectors and rural communities served by **social enterprises** that are led by or focused on engaging youth towards rural revitalization
- Develop and advocate changes in government policy and programs relevant to engaging youth as key stakeholders in social entrepreneurship as pathway to rural revitalization and sustainable development.
- Generate support from private donors, financial institutions, national and intergovernmental bodies as well as the business sector to broaden impact and practice of cross sectoral collaboration supportive to social entrepreneurship as pathway to rural revitalization and sustainable development.

The initiating groups of the platform intend to engage and capacitate youth as key stakeholders to take up the path of social entrepreneurship towards rural revitalization (RR). The platform intends to mobilize youth who are interested in rural revitalization to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Target youth include university students, new graduates and young professionals, and potential social entrepreneurs and social innovators among the youth in urban and rural areas. These different segments of the youth will be engaged differently given their interest, **skills and talents**. Bringing in young social entrepreneurs and young professionals who have or shall be provided with knowledge and skills in developing innovative solutions to problems of the poor and marginalized communities and sectors in the rural areas shall be a key element in galvanizing rural revitalization for sustainable development. **This would include initiatives in building the resilience and capability of rural communities to address climate change, pandemics and other unforeseen disasters**. The Platform shall also be mobilizing organizations involved in rural development, rural revitalization, social entrepreneurship and youth programs as partners in youth engagement. Using social entrepreneurship as a major pathway, **the Platform shall serve and meaningfully engage** marginalized rural communities and sectors especially **rural women**, farmers, agricultural workers, fishers and indigenous people **as empowered actors in transforming** their lives, livelihoods and living environments.

In the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the RR, Youth and SE Platform seeks to contribute to the acceleration of most of the goals and in particular, the following:

- SDG 1 – no poverty
- SDG 2 – zero hunger
- SDG 3 – good health and well-being
- **SDG 5 – gender equality**
- **SDG 8 – decent work and inclusive growth**
- **SDG 10 – reduced inequality**

- SDG 11 – sustainable cities and communities
- **SDG 12 – responsible consumption and production**
- SDG 13 – climate action
- SDG 14 – life below water
- SDG 15 – life on land

Proposed strategies and actions of the platform include:

- cultural exchange and studies on rural revitalization practices and systems such as on food production, storage, and distribution, and on ecological design thinking
- social enterprise development at community and institutional levels
- mobilization and capacity building of youth: This shall build on the initiatives of the national rural reconstruction and citizens' movements in China, the Philippines, and Thailand that have collaborated to strengthen exchanges in the areas of ecological agriculture development, cultural revitalization, and green sustainable community building. By establishing an exchange platform for youth between these countries, the program facilitates sharing of traditional wisdom and experiences on rural regeneration in the process building a foundation for people-to-people collaboration. This has featured online learning exchange among youths, community organizations and support NGOs in China, Philippines, and Thailand, to strengthen the discourse on food security and resiliency in ecological, climate, and health hazards.
- policy advocacy and cross sectoral collaboration to **create** an enabling environment and ecosystem for massive youth engagement in social entrepreneurship for rural revitalization.

The RR, Youth and SE Platform shall strive to interface with the 4 other platforms for inclusive recovery, building back fairer and accelerating the SDGs. This is to enrich the initiatives of this platform and ensure that the 4 other platforms give due regard and make a contribution to engaging rural communities and rural revitalization. The 4 other platforms are: Women's Empowerment, Livelihoods and Food in Agricultural Value Chains; Decent Work for All in Sustainable Value Chains; Technological Innovations for Sustainable Development, and Health for All. The RR, Youth and SE Platform shall also co-create relevant efforts with the COVID-19 Catalyzing the Recovery of Social and Community Enterprises for Transformation (CRESCENT) Asia-Pacific Initiative led by ISEA and Catalyst 2030.

The RR, Youth and SE Platform shall be guided by an integrated sustainable rural development framework evolved and enriched by the lessons derived from many years of experience in rural reconstruction and integrated rural development. Key elements of this framework are the centrality of empowering people and communities and of engaging governments and other development actors to work together in shifting rural development policy and practice.

The RR, Youth and SE Platform has the following core organizations as members and co-conveners:

- Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM) as Co-Convener
- Sources for Action (SFA) – Rural Reconstruction China as Co-Convener
- Rural Reconstruction Nepal as Co-Convener
- Change Fusion Institute (Thailand)
- International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR)
- Dhan Foundation (India)
- Institute of Social Entrepreneurship in Asia (ISEA)

III. Action Plan of the RR, Youth and SE Platform:

1) Continuous strengthening and consolidation of Platform Stakeholders:

- a. A Virtual Launch of the Rural Revitalization, Youth and Social Entrepreneurship Platform on July 19, 2022, timed with the PRRM's 70th Anniversary will be conducted to consolidate the stakeholders of the platform.
- b. A pre-launch roundtable discussion on June 29, 2022 with potential stakeholders of the platform, towards broadening membership among youth organizations and organizations engaged in rural development
- c. Continuous partnership building and resource mobilization of the RR, Youth and SE Platform to ensure that objectives and activities are accomplished with enough resources.

2) Co-creation of spaces in bringing rural reconstruction practice and policy in the Asian region into a sustainable and resilient path

- a. Mapping of existing initiatives on rural revitalization, youth and SE as input to determining more appropriate areas for regional/ cross-country youth learning exchanges/ visits.
- b. Learning Exchange on rural reconstruction/revitalization practices and systems, youth and social entrepreneurship. The learning exchange shall feature quarterly online fora aimed at exchange of experiences, insights and lessons among the platform's constituency on policies and practices relevant to rural revitalization, youth and SE
- c. Dialogue with governments, multilateral agencies, the private sector and civil society using the UNDESA Report on Reconsidering Rural Development as reference. This is meant to contribute to collaborative efforts towards bringing rural development to a more sustainable and resilient path in general and generating support for youth engagement in social entrepreneurship as a pathway to sustainable rural development in particular.

- d. Case Research and country level historical study/ documentation of RR, Youth and SE practices/ initiatives aimed at showcasing best practices and drawing lessons and insights useful to the platform and its stakeholders The results of the studies can then be shared in public/online fora and published online.
- 3) Support for the youth to engage and be involved in social entrepreneurship towards rural revitalization**
- a. **Engage the youth on-line to learn about existing social enterprise practices/initiatives in the Asian region** after the launch of this platform
 - September-October: **selected cases on Social Enterprises for Rural/Community Revitalization in East Asia** (one day from historical review to current practices on RR and SE and youth roles)
 - October-November: same but **in Southeast Asia**
 - November to December: same but **in South Asia**
 - b. Regional Youth Internship Program that would promote rural revitalization and social entrepreneurship among the youth in China, India, Nepal, Philippines and Thailand. It is hoped that with this, the youth will be **provided with spaces for self-discovery and learning and be encouraged to consider going back to the rural areas to practice social entrepreneurship towards rural revitalization and sustainable development.**
 - c. Youth Learning Exchange on-site and online will be organized which can be shared at this platform for youth to participate for deep dialogue and exchange. **This would include sharing/discussion among the youth about their needs towards defining a more appropriate approach in engaging them in social entrepreneurship towards rural revitalization and sustainable development.**
- 4) Co-creation** with the COVID-19 Catalyzing Recovery of Social and Community Enterprises for Transformation (CRESENT) Initiative a Social Innovation Program and Fund that would support youth initiatives in social entrepreneurship for rural revitalization. This Social Innovation Program and Fund aims to provide an accessible package of services, and hybrid financing to new or existing social enterprises led by youth or engaging youth **towards rural revitalization and sustainable development.**