FROM THE GROUND UP
CASE STUDIES IN COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Asian Development Bank
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From the ground up: case studies in community empowerment.


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6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
Tel: +63 2 632 4444
Fax: +6 3 2 636 4444
www.adb.org

For orders, please contact:
Department of External Relations
Fax: +63 2 636 2648
E-mail: adbpub@adb.org
CHAPTER 1. PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA: TAPPING A NEW WELL
A group of isolated villages in Jiangxi province, People’s Republic of China, is in the forefront of a bold experiment to involve civil society in the fight against poverty. For the first time, the Government is giving funds to NGOs to facilitate community-based projects. If successful, this ADB-supported trial could be widely replicated, creating powerful new partnerships in support of more equitable development.

CHAPTER 2. INDIA: SELF-HELP IN THE SLUMS
India’s social problems are magnified in the slums where half of the big city populations dwell. In Kolkata, under an innovative ADB-financed project, NGOs are mobilizing self-help groups to tackle issues, such as domestic violence, child labor, and underage marriage.

CHAPTER 3. INDONESIA: HARVESTING NEW IDEAS
The fall of Indonesia’s President Suharto in 1998 sparked a shift to democracy—followed by “Big Bang” decentralization. In the wake of this devolution of responsibility, an innovative ADB-financed project is enabling poor farmers, with the help of local government and NGOs, to take charge of village improvement projects. Though none of the stakeholders was ready for this radical bottom-up approach, it is gradually taking hold.

CHAPTER 4. MONGOLIA: FRUITS OF RESILIENCE
Long treated as outcasts, Mongolia’s disabled were especially vulnerable when the economy collapsed in the 1990s. A pilot ADB-financed project, strongly backed by government and implemented by plucky NGOs, helped alter public attitudes, as well as increase the income-earning potential of the disabled. With new skills, many are holding their own in mainstream society.

CHAPTER 5. PAPUA NEW GUINEA: RESTORING THE REEF
Overfishing and destructive fishing practices are depleting Papua New Guinea’s richly diverse coastal waters and coral reefs, causing deprivation among coastal communities. Now, mobilized by NGOs under a pilot ADB-financed project, some two dozen shoreline villages are taking action to protect their marine resources. By trading short-term pain for long-term gain, they are beginning to reverse the tide of overexploitation.
CHAPTER 6. SRI LANKA: CASH UP FRONT, PLEASE 80
Sri Lanka boasts a tradition of community water management stretching back to ancient times. An ADB-supported rural water project took community involvement one step further, shocking villagers with the requirement that they contribute up front for construction costs and assume responsibility for operation and maintenance. Today, hundreds of communities are receiving clean, easily accessible water from systems they helped to build and now run independently.

CHAPTER 7. TAJIKISTAN: REBUILDING BROKEN LIVES 92
After declaring Independence in 1991, Tajikistan endured economic collapse, civil war, and widespread hunger. To help rural people back on their feet, ADB financed a pilot microcredit-based livelihood project for women and farmers. Implemented through two international NGOs, the Aga Khan Foundation and CARE International, the experiment encountered many challenges, but produced several positive outcomes.

CHAPTER 8. VIET NAM: FIGHTING FOR THE FOREST 104
ADB and the World Wide Fund for Nature have partnered to save one of mainland Southeast Asia’s most diverse rainforests in Viet Nam’s Central Annamites. They are helping largely ethnic communities to improve their livelihoods, and fight off illegal loggers and poachers. The two partners face an array of environmental threats brought on by the construction of roads and dams, as well as gold mining.
Numerous studies have shown that the participation of beneficiaries in development projects tends to improve the effectiveness, relevance, and sustainability of those projects. Among other things, participation contributes to better governance, and to the empowerment and social inclusion of disadvantaged groups. It also provides beneficiaries with influence and control over development initiatives and resources, and decisions that affect them.

Recognizing these and other positive impacts of participation, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) regularly engages stakeholders in the projects and programs that it finances throughout the Asia and Pacific region. Projects aimed at reducing poverty through livelihoods development and improvements in educational and health outcomes—as well as projects targeting ethnic minorities, rural development, and local governance—are particularly well-suited for greater involvement of beneficiaries.

Participation is often facilitated by, or channeled through, civil society organizations (CSOs), such as community-based organizations, self-help groups, water users’ associations, people’s organizations, and farmer cooperatives. ADB works closely with CSOs in many of the activities that it finances because of these organizations’ knowledge of local conditions, ability to mobilize beneficiaries, grassroots experience, and commitment to social development.

Projects with participatory components are often among the most compelling because of their human element, including the positive and significant change that they stimulate in the attitudes and condition of poor and marginalized groups. To illustrate the impact of participatory development, ADB has assembled the following collection of stories from eight projects implemented in various sectors and countries. They reveal some of the challenges of pursuing a participatory approach, as well as the liberating and empowering results achieved when such challenges can be overcome through the commitment of concerned parties, including dedicated individuals, communities, CSOs, governments at the various levels, and international finance institutions.

In bringing these stories to light, we hope to focus attention on the accomplishments of communities that have seized a chance to better their condition, expand appreciation for the rich potential of bottom-up development, encourage active engagement of those directly affected by development activities, and inspire thinking about how practices featured in this publication may be usefully applied in other contexts.

Xianbin Yao
Acting Director General
Regional and Sustainable Development Department
Amid the democratization of today’s Internet-connected world and a growing belief that the “wisdom of crowds” proves less fallible than the judgment of a ruling elite, some may find it surprising that participatory—or people-centered—development has not made more headway in Asia and the Pacific.

After all, there is convincing evidence that projects designed to improve the lives of poor people stand a much better chance of success when those people are consulted about their needs, and when they feel a sense of ownership in the choice, design, implementation, operation, and maintenance of the projects.

The case studies in this book show that participatory development can provide win–win outcomes for all stakeholders. The disadvantaged and marginalized benefit from a sense of empowerment, as well as from the practical outcomes of a project, such as a road or a water supply system. The government achieves its development goal more effectively and sustainably—and at a lower cost if the community contributes cash and labor.

Yet in a region where strong, often authoritarian, governments pulled many countries out of postwar poverty and chaos and set them firmly on the path of industrialization and export-led economic growth, the legacy of top-down decision making remains pervasive.

From the 1960s, governments—and the development institutions that supported them—launched transport, power, and water supply projects to promote diversification in agrarian-based economies. The idea was that the economic benefits from large infrastructure projects would “trickle down” to the neediest.

When it became clear that economic growth in itself was not a comprehensive panacea for poverty alleviation, and that other interventions were required, development efforts shifted, in the 1990s, to social infrastructure (especially health and education), environmental protection, and promotion of the private sector.
Along with increasing economic emancipation, many Asian and Pacific countries moved toward more democratic processes and saw the development of civil society institutions, including nongovernment organizations (NGOs).

Today, the focus of poverty reduction policies is on those at the edges of society, who have been bypassed by rapid economic growth. Many of these marginal communities are in remote and isolated areas, lacking physical infrastructure, as well as access to education and health. Examples in this book of such communities include coastal fishers in Papua New Guinea's island provinces, and ethnic minorities in Viet Nam's highlands. Other excluded communities may live in urban areas, but are confined to the sidelines for social reasons. Examples include the slum dwellers of Kolkata, a large city in eastern India that serves as a magnet for economic migrants, and disabled people in Mongolia, who have long been regarded as outcasts and excluded from mainstream education and employment opportunities.

The challenge of assisting the marginalized is not only that they can be physically difficult to reach, but also that they are often less receptive to change, due to a lack of confidence and capability. Another important challenge in rural areas is that needs vary from village to village, necessitating a flexible approach tailored to local circumstances, rather than a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

To help mobilize, organize, guide, and train marginal communities to plan and implement projects requires a great deal of patience, understanding and commitment, in addition to financial resources. These are qualities that government officials acknowledge are more often found in community-based organizations and other NGOs with close ties to the grass roots.

Although governments have been—and some still are—wary of NGOs, regarding some as a challenge to their authority, there is increasing recognition in official circles that NGOs can be a strong ally in the fight against poverty.

Nowhere is this shift in attitude more significant than in the People's Republic of China (PRC), at once the world's most populous nation and one with some 20 million extremely poor people. The opening chapter shows how the PRC has embarked on a bold experiment to use NGOs as partners in a drive to reduce village-level poverty. For the first time, Beijing is entrusting NGOs with funds to facilitate community-based projects in several villages in the southern province of Jiangxi on a pilot basis.

Officials acknowledge that this ground-breaking project has a pragmatic aspect—the Government simply does not have the manpower and other resources to meet the growing need for social services. At the same time, the partnership with NGOs to tackle rural poverty fits in with the Government's promotion of social harmony and a “new socialist countryside” to reduce tensions caused by a widening income gap between rich and poor.

The PRC is adopting a cautious, scientific approach, using a mix of three approaches—traditional government-administered programs, government-led but NGO-implemented programs, and NGO-led and -implemented programs—and comparing their results. Under the latter models, NGOs typically spend months getting to know villagers and their needs, and helping them to plan and implement community improvement projects.
The results of early assessments show enhanced transparency and higher rates of villager participation and satisfaction with the NGO-facilitated approach. Such success gives hope to those who would like to see the community-based process extended to more of the 148,000 “poverty” villages across the country that the PRC has targeted for assistance.

The chapter on Indonesia shows that even when a community-based approach is introduced in “Big Bang” fashion—as it was during the massive shift to decentralization in Indonesia in the late 1990s—it can still work, even though neither the district authorities, nor the NGOs, nor the rural communities were properly prepared for it. Small-scale farmers in semiarid Central Sulawesi have organized themselves into groups so they can decide on road and irrigation projects, as well as introduce new agricultural technologies to diversify crops and improve yields.

It is no surprise that community-based projects work more easily in countries with a tradition of civic involvement and high rates of literacy, as illustrated by the story about a rural water supply and sanitation project in Sri Lanka. In Kegalle province, villagers were initially shocked to learn that, if they wanted to participate in the project, they would have to contribute 20% of the costs—and shoulder the responsibility for constructing, operating, and maintaining the water supply systems. Yet about 95% of the water users’ associations in the 150 villages that asked to take part in the project now manage their own facilities.

Safeguarding livelihoods also provides a powerful incentive for communities to take more responsibility for protecting the natural resources upon which they depend.

In Papua New Guinea, fishing communities in the island provinces of New Ireland and Morong are so concerned with declining fish catches that, with the encouragement of NGOs, they have formed village management committees and set up rules to curb overfishing and destructive fishing practices. NGOs have enabled them to better understand the interdependence of sedentary and mobile elements of the coral reef ecosystem and how easily it can be destroyed. Coastal communities are also increasingly keen to organize patrols and take action against intruders who poach illegally and destructively in their waters.

In Viet Nam, NGOs are helping indigenous ethnic minorities in the mountains to form village-based groups so they can better protect their forest habitat, including its wildlife, by planting cash crops instead of practicing slash-and-burn agriculture, and also by forming patrols to guard against illegal logging and hunting by lowlanders.

In Mongolia, skills training by NGOs has enabled thousands of disabled persons—whom employers are reluctant to engage out of deeply-entrenched prejudice—to set up small businesses or earn income through a variety of services ranging from hairdressing to watch-repairing. The project has also raised the capacity of NGOs—staffed almost entirely by disabled persons—so they can continue to provide skills training on a sustainable basis. Importantly, an awareness campaign is also helping to instill a more compassionate attitude among the public toward the disabled.

In India, NGOs have helped vulnerable migrants in the slums, especially women, to form self-help groups to better cope with social problems, such as domestic violence and underage marriage, as well as for training in income-generating activities.
In Tajikistan, where tens of thousands faced starvation following the collapse of the economy, as well as civil war in the 1990s, NGOs have helped women form groups that, with microfinance and training, have been able to play an economic role in the family for the first time. Similarly, NGOs have helped farmers organize themselves into cooperatives that can borrow funds and receive guidance on how to improve yields and diversify crops.

Such case studies also show how receptive and eager communities are to the notion of forming organizations that can be effective in improving their lives.

As highlighted in the Asian Development Bank’s *Staff Guide to Consultation and Participation*, participation contributes to poverty reduction. It does this by bringing disadvantaged groups into decision making, and by promoting their involvement in project formulation. Participation can assist them in developing the attitudes needed to improve their situation and give them hope.

One of the main obstacles to devolution lies in the obduracy of traditional attitudes, particularly in government departments. Some officials still question why the poor need to be consulted at all. “We are giving the poor something for free, why should we need to discuss this with them?” is an attitude still all too common in some influential quarters of officiandom.

Other officials remain suspicious about NGOs, questioning their capacity to help implement programs. They are right to be cautious: NGOs need to be assessed for their motivation and competence and to submit to scrutiny and oversight. But, often, such qualms are a thin disguise for the fear officials feel that their jobs and responsibilities are being undermined.

In the PRC, officials are candid about this. “We hated the idea,” said one provincial chief, recalling his response when the central government first proposed that NGOs be given control of the development budget in some villages. But the same official readily concedes that he has come to recognize that NGOs can do some things better than local governments. “They get involved with local people. They respect the real opinions of the villagers and they identify with how they think. They bring energy to their work,” he says.

The central government did much to change such attitudes by laying the groundwork through seminars to explain how government and NGOs could bring their respective strengths to forge a fruitful partnership.

No development strategy is perfect, but in many instances, the devolution of responsibility to community-based organizations produces better results than top-down approaches. In a world where the gap is widening between the very rich and the very poor, governments increasingly recognize that empowering poor communities is an effective way of promoting social equity and societal harmony. It is also an area in which NGOs and development agencies have a valuable supporting role to play.
This book required the help and cooperation of a large number of people, particularly members of the marginal communities who invariably offered the author warm hospitality, as well as their candid views. Many of them are mentioned in the stories that follow.

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**INDIA**

- **Santanu Basu**, Project Director, Kolkata Environmental Improvement Project
- **Ranjana Dasgupta**, Team Leader, Social Development Unit, Kolkata Environmental Improvement Project
- **Kali Sankar Ghosh, Prabir Ray, Prabal Chatterjee, Sulakshana Ray, Hiranmay Nath, and Nipa Satpathy**, Social Development Unit, Kolkata Environmental Improvement Project
- **Madhuchhanda Deb**, Ward Councilor, Kolkata
- **Bipasha Keshri**, Coordinator, and **Asmita Banerjee**, Field Worker, CINI (Child In Need Institute) ASHA
- **Aftabuddin Ahmed**, Coordinator, and **Rubina Hussain**, Field Worker, Tijala SHED (Society for Human and Educational Development)
- **Subroto Dey**, Coordinator, and **Roma Sutar**, Field Worker, i-Land Informatics Ltd
- **Kamal Chakrabarti**, Leader, Men’s Group, Uttar Kalikapur canal embankment community
INDONESIA

E. Eko Ananto, Program Coordinator, Indonesian Agency for Agricultural Research and Development, Ministry of Agriculture
Dahlil Masahuri, Head, Project Implementation Unit, Donggala district, Sulawesi
Akhyar A. Mahmud, Pudjananti Indonesia
Sumadi, Director, Yayasan Rosontapura
Agus Susilohadi, Leader, Farmers’ Group, Tolongano village
Wartin Yahya, Village Facilitator, Guntarano village
Armin Yusup and Hasna, Village Committee, Guntarano village

MONGOLIA

Sodnom Chinzorig, Vice-Minister, Ministry of Social Welfare and Labour
Tugsjargal Gandhi, Member of Parliament
Tseden Oyunbaatar, President, Mongolian National Federation of Disabled People
Purevjal Tumurbaatar, Director, Tumur Foundation
Nambar Sodnomtseren, Head, Independent Trade Union of Disabled Persons
Bayarsaikhan Batsuukh, Head, NGO for Disabled Persons, Darkhan province
Sambuu Selenge, Training Specialist

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Sylvester B. Pokajam, Acting Managing Director, National Fisheries Authority
Terry Ward, Financial Controller, National Fisheries Authority
Ronald Kuk, Executive Manager Projects, National Fisheries Authority
Augustine Mohiba, Executive Management Group, Fisheries Department, National Fisheries Authority
Welete Wararu, Executive Manager, Provincial & Industry Liaison Group, National Fisheries Authority
Hugh Walton, Adviser, National Fisheries Authority
Tatek R. Buraik, Principal, National Fisheries College
John Aini, Head, Ailan Awareness
Esekian Towon, Paul Vatlom, and Robert Melki, Ailan Awareness
Francis Bolaf, Chairman, Fisheries Management Committee, Panakais village
Marcus Nges, Chairman, Fisheries Management Committee, Panamecho village
Michael Schmid, Biological Oceanographer
Shaun Keane, Nusa Island Retreat, Kavieng
Cara Koopman, Scuba Ventures, Dive Operator, Kavieng
Brian T. Green, General Manager, Ailan Seafoods Ltd.

SRI LANKA

K.L.L. Premanath, General Manager, National Water Supply and Drainage Board
W.B.G. Fernando, Assistant General Manager, National Water Supply and Drainage Board
A.H. Gunapala, Chief Sociologist, National Water Supply and Drainage Board
Rohan Wijesooriya, District Manager, Kegalle, National Water Supply and Drainage Board
Vagn Rehjø, Consultant, COWI A/S
W.A. Banda and Lalitha Namasteewarachi, Water Users’ Association, Bisowela
P.G. Chandrapala and Mathota Somadasa, Water Users’ Association, Kitulgala
Jayalath Edirisingha, Dehiowita Janatha Sanvidanya (NGO)
TAJIKISTAN

Kishwar Abdulalishoev, General Manager, and Valdosheva Jamma, Manager, Mountain Societies Development Support Programme, Aga Khan Foundation

Louis Alexander, Country Director, Matluba Akhunova, Project Manager, and Mukhiddin Nurmatov, former Acting Project Manager, CARE Tajikistan

Fotima, Djamoaat Chairperson, Guliston

Zebo Oimatova, Chairperson, Bonuvoni Karasu Women’s Federation, Vahdat district

Rasul Tuhtanazarov, Village Head, and Anzara Sufieva, Women’s Group Head, Elok village

Zarif Sharipov, Village Head, and Musharif Nuratieva, Women’s Group Head, Zarkamari 3 village

Akbarali Abdulloev, Chairperson, Guliston Farmers’ Association

VIET NAM

Duong Chi Cong, Director, Quang Nam Department of Natural Resources and Environment

Diep Thanh Phong, Director, Quang Nam Forest Protection Department

Tran Van Thu, Director, and Le Cong Be, Vice-Director, Song Thanh Nature Reserve, Quang Nam Forest Protection Department


Coor Tong, Village Head, Pa Rong, Song Thanh Nature Reserve

Nikolas Arhem, Anthropologist
TAPPING A NEW WELL
Gao Lingxiu is a small woman with a farmer’s weather-beaten face and busy hands. In the remote village of Dongfeng in Jiangxi province, People’s Republic of China (PRC), the 58-year-old grandmother still brings in the harvest and keeps a watchful eye on a bevy of children playing outside her home. She sits on her porch, spinning fiber for mattresses, in the poorest corner of the village, where some are from ethnic groups and others are infirm and elderly.

Seeing visitors approach, she springs up and fusses over them, chiding the village head for not giving her notice to prepare tea and snacks. Chatting merrily, Ms. Gao accompanies the party to a new water pump and, as the visitors leave, she pats each one on the back or on the arm, laughing.

“This woman was shy and withdrawn when we first came here. Now look at her—she is confident and outgoing,” says a field officer with a nongovernment organization (NGO) that is working with local villagers. Ms. Gao is one of several Dongfeng women who seem to have shed inhibitions this year.

The villagers are taking part in a path-breaking program in which the Government of the PRC is partnering with NGOs to combat poverty.

For the first time, competitively selected NGOs have been given government funds—500,000 renminbi (RMB), or about $70,000, per village—to work with villagers and local governments in carrying out improvement plans through a series of NGO-facilitated consultations.

As a result, 2007 was an exceptionally hectic year for this normally quiet village in an isolated, hilly corner of Ningdu County. The rustic peace of Dongfeng was frequently interrupted by the sound of hammering but, by year’s end, its 1,900 residents had new water pumps, a modest piped water and irrigation system, several small irrigation dams, and a bridge. Some of its roads had also been repaired. One of its proudest boasts was a new community center.

The reason for the frenetic pace of construction is that Dongfeng is one of 16 pilot villages in the PRC’s flagship NGO–Government Partnerships in Village-Level Poverty Alleviation Project.
“This is a significant step in our poverty alleviation efforts,” says Wu Zhong, the progressive director general of the country’s top poverty relief office, the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development (LGOP), in Beijing. “The Government was the main force when we tackled poverty alleviation on a large scale, but now our objectives are more detailed and we need to mobilize civil society, including NGOs, to improve our efficiency. So the Government and NGOs are combining their different strengths for the advantage of poor people.”

Specifically, after reducing the number of absolute poor in the countryside from 250 million in 1978 to 21.5 million in 2006, largely through macro-level reforms, PRC is now targeting some 148,000 villages—about a fifth of the PRC’s total villages—that are scattered over 1,800 counties and concentrated in the poorer central and western regions.

Cautiously, the Government is adopting a social scientific approach, involving experimental comparisons across pilot, control, and so-called hybrid villages. This pioneer venture was initiated by LGOP, in dialogue with the Ministry of Finance, and is being supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) with US$1 million in technical assistance. At its center, the Government is allocating RMB8 million ($1.1 million) of poverty funds to NGOs to facilitate projects in the pilot villages, working with local governments.

An umbrella NGO, the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA), which retains close ties to LGOP but is financially independent, is overseeing the pilot test, including a rigorous bidding process to select nine NGOs to facilitate projects in three poor counties in Jiangxi Province. In addition to ADB’s assistance, funded by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development, Singapore-based RGM International is contributing $80,000 for NGO capacity building.

Set against sensitivities surrounding NGOs in the PRC, the project appears to reflect a seismic shift in the Government’s attitude toward NGOs. Amidst redoubled efforts to address rural challenges and promote social harmony, the Government is also guardedly exploring the partnering role of NGOs, acting as the ears and voice of common villagers.
Much of the motivation behind the turnaround is pragmatic. The Government is in the midst of reforms that include downsizing a massive and, sometimes, unwieldy civil service system, even as its investments in social programs expand.

“PRC civil society is in a nascent stage of development, facing a bumpy, uncertain road ahead. But the new drive for people-centered, harmonious development presents an unprecedented opportunity to harness the untapped potential of civil society,” says ADB economist Chris Spohr, who is managing the project in ADB’s resident mission in Beijing. “These are critical steps for building up civil society and promoting balanced development.”

“The Government realizes it has neither the manpower, nor is sufficiently efficient or effective, to meet a growing demand for social services, so it needs civil groups like NGOs to help deliver good services,” observes straight-talking Professor Li Xiaoyun, of the China Agricultural University, who is leading a group of national and international experts assessing policy implications from the pilot test. “This requires a big change in political mentality.”

At the same time, the project fits in with the Government’s policy of promoting a “new socialist countryside” to reduce the growing tensions caused by a widening gap between rich and poor.

Some analysts compare this approach to Premier Deng Xiaoping’s opening the door to a socialist market economy with his epochal reforms of 1978—which ushered in an era of PRC-style capitalism. In the beginning, however, the Government also trod carefully, notes ADB’s Spohr.

“In exploring how to unlock market forces to boost productivity, Deng spoke of ‘groping for stones’ in crossing an uncertain river,” says Mr. Spohr. “Now faced with a new imperative of social harmony, I’d argue that civil society may represent ‘the next private sector’. The Government’s cautious exploration makes sense, but if this works, partnership with NGOs could be
replicated not only in poverty reduction but in areas like health and education—as is already happening in many countries."

Meanwhile, in Dongfeng, the flurry of building has been prompted by a tight deadline—NGOs have had little more than a year to help villagers choose and implement improvement plans, while teaming up with local governments.

“We had to disburse our RMB500,000 budget in 1 year and it's been a big rush, though now we have been given a 6-month extension until June 2008,” says Liu Meiying, Secretary-General of the NGO, Promotion Association for Mountain-River-Lake Regional Sustainable Development (MRL).

“But 1 year is also too short for planning longer-term, industrial-scale activities like growing oranges on the hillside.”

Without a doubt, the biggest difference between NGOs and local government agencies is the rapport that NGOs build up with local communities as a result of lengthy discussions. In opening up about their lives and hopes, villagers have changed enormously in their attitude and are now specifying what they want, says Ms. Liu, a charismatic woman who left a computer-based job for a field job because she likes interacting with people.

“In the beginning, when we asked villagers why they were poor, all they could say was that they lacked money. It never occurred to them that they could do something about it. They had left all decisions to the village leader and so any village improvements were usually about infrastructure,” says Ms. Liu.

One of the Nanchang-based NGO’s main tasks is to help women, who bear the brunt of rural poverty. Country folk may live amid bucolic beauty—Dongfeng’s pine-clad hills, for example, are shrouded in mist and overlook a quilt of green and yellow fields, the kind of image depicted in Chinese brush paintings.

But the tranquil surface often masks an existence of hardship, just as the red roofs with curved tiles on adobe dwellings hide the neglect or disrepair beneath.

In Dongfeng, as in villages across the country, up to half the adults—mostly men, but women, too—work on construction sites or in factories in the big cities. They are away for months, if not years, at a time, sleeping in dormitories, leaving spouses or other relatives or friends to look after farm and family.

In one Dongfeng hamlet, a community leader, Liao Bingsheng, says one in four inhabitants are in the neighboring provinces of Guangdong and Fujian and return only for the Spring Festival during the Lunar New Year. Many of these migrants would like to settle in the cities, but a complex registration system makes this difficult. Mr. Liao says his hamlet has more than 20 "liushouertong" or “left-behind children”—the Chinese term for the country’s estimated 23 million children who remain at home when one or both parents depart for work in faraway cities.
In much of rural PRC, women are taking on a rising share of agricultural and family tasks. They are the village backbone, but often feel they have little influence in its affairs. Rural women are often caught up in the age-old cycle of poverty and ignorance and are disadvantaged by low education levels and restricted involvement in community decision making. In Dongfeng, for example, almost all the older women are illiterate, says one NGO field officer, and the younger women are not well educated. International experience suggests that women’s empowerment is central to breaking intergenerational poverty cycles, but it is only recently that their voice is being heard in Dongfeng.

Ms. Liu, a strong woman in a leadership position, provides a role model for women but she says, “at the beginning of the project, some men see you are a woman and do not respect you very much.”

Nowadays, however, some of the village’s women have started talking of enterprises, such as making knitted products or growing bamboo to make baskets or handles. It is also a sign of the times that some of the village projects implemented in 2007 are geared toward women’s needs.

One hamlet built a piped water scheme to reduce the time women spend carrying and fetching water. Half the hamlet used to rely on a 10-year-old well, but it either became contaminated from underground sources—especially after neighboring fields were sprayed with pesticide four times a year—or dried up during drought.

To see how the villagers solved the problem, one must climb up a steep and slippery path. At the top of the hill, villagers crowd around a sealed reservoir and sedimentation tank—and a sign announcing “Implemented by government and NGO.”
This is the intermediary point for clean water that flows from a rain-fed source 2 kilometers away and is distributed to some 30 households.

Apart from technical help from a water utility company, the villagers built this facility with contributions of labor and cash. “I helped to lay the pipes,” says Liao Xiaoyun, 30, one able-bodied man who chose to remain in Dongfeng rather than work in a city. He contributed eight days of labor and feels a sense of ownership. “My wife is especially happy that she doesn’t have to pump and carry water any more—she just turns on the tap,” he says. “Our two children also get diarrhea less often.”

At one home just off the main track, housewife Qiu Lanxiu, her daughter, and a visiting relative are plucking chickens in the yard and rinsing them under a running tap. Qiu’s life has become easier since a pipe was connected to her house in the first quarter of 2007. “I used to walk 20 minutes twice a day to the stream for water,” she says, looking up from her task. “It was hard, especially when it rained and made the path muddy.”

Significantly, the villagers operate and maintain this sub-project, which also provides irrigation water. “Before the villagers regained their community spirit, this may have been the type of small project that the Government would allow to lag unsupervised and eventually fall apart,” says Ellen Liu, an NGO and village planning project officer with CFPA. “Today, the villagers run this reservoir system, which provides drinking water and increases the yield of their crops.”

It already seems a long time since villagers met NGO representatives with suspicion when they first arrived, recalls Liao Bingsheng. “All we knew was the word ‘government.’ We had never heard of ‘nongovernment’ and here were these people offering their services for free. We were not very cooperative,” he says. “But they came back time and again to explain what they were doing and, gradually, we accepted the idea. Now villagers invite them into their homes for tea.”

Volunteerism, or seeking self-fulfillment by helping others, is slowly emerging in the PRC. But anyone who thinks it is easy to help poor persons—or wants to know what it takes to do so—should talk to Song Dingshan, who works for the NGO, Kunming Earthwatch Institute for Sustainable Development of Natural Resources.

Mr. Song is 45, a strongly-built man with thick, dark hair, who is heading the NGO’s work in Daheng village, Xingguo County.

Daheng, with a population of 2,729, is literally at the end of the road. Its dead-end location is a major cause of its moribund economy. Farmers here live a precarious existence, many living well below the official poverty line of RMB693 a year ($98). Some lack water because of dilapidated irrigation systems.

A walk past neat green fields and morosely-staring water buffalos brings a visitor to the house of farmer Li Zuoping, just as he strides down a path, a sturdy man of 52, with close cropped hair, carrying a hoe over his shoulder.

Together with his wife, Zeng Shuixiu, and two grown-up children, he has about four mu (about a quarter hectare) of land, but half of it is troublesome to cultivate because of a water shortage. “I tried planting rice in one field this year, but the crop failed because of the dry conditions,” he says. His annual income is a mere RMB500 ($70).

Help may be on the way, Mr. Song reassures him. Village improvement plans include fixing irrigation canals. Mr. Li brightens. “One of the first things I want to do is to repair my house,” he says.

A fair number of Daheng’s residents, including the very poorest, live in the hills around the village. As an outsider, an early obstacle for Mr. Song was communication.

“We had trouble understanding the local dialect. But we asked people to speak slowly, and that helped. People didn’t trust us in the beginning,” he says. “But after people found out we were staying here and that we were paying for our accommodation and meals—though some residents refused to accept money from us—they began to realize we were here to provide a service.”

Finding the poorest households was sometimes a logistical nightmare. “We went from door to door. We stopped people randomly on the road. Sometimes, we rode on motorbikes to the foot of the mountain and walked up by foot for 4 hours...
to reach people,” he says. “The poorest people often live the furthest away or are hard to find. When we find them, no one wants to admit they’re poor so we have to find out about them from other villagers.”

Sometimes, a sub-project arises out of special circumstances. One involves replacing 70 rotting wooden power poles after one toppled over in a wet field, electrocuting a farmer.

“The men are more concerned with building roads because they want to go to the cities, and they want industry to come in so they can make money. The women care more about their children, their environment, schooling, sanitation, and health care,” says Mr. Song.

Thus, two of Daheng’s biggest plans involve roads—flattening one and concreting another for 1 kilometer—and a surfaced playground, with a basketball hoop and ping pong table.

The sound of children’s laughter breaks the desolate stillness of the village as a dozen youngsters play a local version of musical chairs on a bare patch of earth that is part of the road. Nearby, Li Shixiang, grandmother of a 9-month-old girl, says she is pleasantly surprised to hear about the various plans and will wait to see if they materialize.

Under the project’s methodology, Daheng was randomly selected as “hybrid” village. While the NGO, like those in the pilot villages, helps villagers to plan and implement projects, budget control rests with the local government. Although most Daheng residents would rather have pilot status, Mr. Song, interestingly, reckons it can be more advantageous to be a hybrid. “It is better if the NGO provides the technical services while the government integrates the resources,” he says.

That said, Mr. Song is adamant that the NGO, working with local officials, can implement a project more efficiently than the Government alone. “Our involvement means the villagers are planning several small projects in 1 year whereas, if the government were doing this, they might undertake only one project a year,” he says. “Also, we have budgeted RMB130,000 (about $18,000) for the cement road, but I doubt if the government would do it with such a low budget. The villagers are contributing labor, and they are more careful with the expenditure because they are involved.”

Whether the projects are completed in a timely fashion depends on when the government funds arrive, says Mr. Song. The problem is that government funds are distributed through central, provincial, county, and village levels, and this process is
subject to delays and leakages. In contrast, project proponents believe that mobilizing NGOs and villagers will enhance transparency and the targeting of funds.

In Daheng, Kunming Earthwatch has encouraged villagers to come up with ideas to generate income. One family moved here from the Three Gorges area, famous for its oranges, and has encouraged locals to grow the fruit. So far, villagers have planted 150 mu of orange trees and one project includes extending this by another 150 mu. The NGO provided seeds to nine volunteer households under a grant, and hopes to convert this into a microcredit program.

Sometimes, the NGO brings in experts to discuss whether some proposals are feasible. One villager wanted to produce milk from cows, but it was pointed out that local people do not drink milk and that the product would turn sour by the time it reached the city. Another resident asked about raising crabs, but was told that such a project needs water and a pump and other basic technology and that the cost of transporting crabs to markets in Guangdong would be high.

The price of NGOs’ commitment is also steep. In helping with the village plan alone, which took nearly half a year, some half a dozen Kunming Earthwatch staff spent weeks in the village, almost exhausting an allocated budget of RMB45,000 ($6,200), says Mr. Song.

Because the law does not allow government funds to be used to pay NGOs, ADB is financing NGO salaries and expenses. “But we have to think about the pilot’s replicability, which means keeping the overhead low—in the order of RMB50,000 ($6,900), or 10% of the government’s budgetary poverty funds assigned to each village,” explains ADB’s Mr. Spohr. “An important factor is that the pilot is essentially state-funded and not donor-driven. If we can show that an incremental cost of 10% can substantially improve the efficacy of government funds, that would present a strong economic argument for mainstreaming NGOs into state programs.”

For NGOs, the price of commitment can be so high that even Mr. Song, a family man with a wife and two children, sometimes wonders about his decision to give up a secure and better-paying civil service job to join the NGO 5 years ago.

“For NGOs, the price of commitment and sacrifice can also be steep”
“My family didn’t really appreciate my decision, but they support me because it’s my choice. But sometimes I am in conflict with myself. It is very challenging work and I chose it myself, but sometimes I wonder if I made the right choice,” he says, his eyes reflecting his uncertainty.

On top of everything else, the nine NGOs are competing against one another. “There are a lot of NGOs working on these projects and some are doing well, some not so well, and some are doing badly. All this puts pressure on me, too,” he adds.

If it has been a stressful year for the NGOs, it has also been a period of adjustment, sometimes painful, for the local government agencies. Used to managing all aspects of poverty programs, it has not been easy to relinquish control of the budget to NGOs in the pilot villages.

“We hated the idea. We were against it. We said, ‘How come the NGOs are coming to interfere with government affairs?’” says Gu Longhui, the outgoing, blunt-speaking Director of the Poverty Alleviation and Development Office (PADO) of Xingguo County, over lunch at the county capital.

But, after introducing a local pork delicacy called “Mao Zedong four stars around the moon,” Mr. Gu says he has come to recognize what the NGOs can offer. He has worked with several NGOs over the last 2 years and says Earthwatch Kunming is “one of the best, very down to earth, and has a very detailed plan.”
NGOs can do things that local governments cannot, he readily concedes. “They get involved with local people. They respect the real opinions of the villagers, they identify with how they think. They bring energy, momentum, to their work,” says Mr. Gu, stabbing the air with a cigarette. “Our county-level office has responsibility for 87 villages and we haven’t got the staff or budget to do what they do.”

Significantly, he says “transparency is the core advantage of NGOs: they are free of corruption.”

Citing an example of their relative impact, Mr. Gu says, “It’s hard for the government to organize a democratic decision in the village. If we do something and 30% of the people aren’t happy, they complain to a higher authority. But if an NGO does something, they don’t complain.”

Although government strengths lie in its resources and networks, Mr. Gu says NGOs can act faster and more effectively. “We used to have 5-year plans, but if an NGO gets the same budget at one time, it accomplishes in a year what we accomplished in 5 years.”

Over in the neighboring county of Ningdu, provincial PADO director Guo Chaoyan, a reserved man with a succinct style of speaking, echoes similar praise for NGOs, but he also has a warning.

Not only does the budget law need to be changed to allow the Government to pay NGOs, he says, but the NGO overhead also needs to be kept down. By comparison with ADB’s 10% budget for the NGO overhead, his PADO has a RMB20 million ($2.76 million) budget with an overhead cost of RMB700,000 ($97,000), or only 3.5%. “These are the issues that the Chinese government needs to reform,” he says. Nor does it help, he adds, that MRL, the NGO working in Dongfeng, is based in Nanchang, half a day’s drive from the project.

The Jiangxi experiment is ongoing, but many are already looking beyond its conclusion. One of the main reasons the pilot project is taking place in this southern province is that it has long had a champion in Zhang Zhihao, the ebullient, back-slapping director general of the provincial PADO.
Mr. Zhang says he had been pushing for this project as far back as 2002 when the Government began calling for a transformation in the role of the state and launched a drive toward more transparency and a more equal society. He is eager to be “the one to first eat crab”—a Chinese expression referring to a pioneer prepared to take risks (braving the claws to taste its meat).

Whatever the result of the experiment, and even if some NGOs do not outperform local government agencies, Mr. Zhang says this is a much-needed opportunity to “mobilize social forces” and is already looking ahead to address the next challenge: the dearth of suitable home-grown NGOs. Depending on classification, the PRC has 200,000 to 350,000 legally registered NGOs, but most are professional or research organizations and there are very few grassroots NGOs with poverty alleviation and development goals.

Mr. Zhang leans over to tell ADB’s Mr. Spohr, “The Chinese government now needs to provide a platform to develop existing NGOs and establish new ones.” Mr. Spohr concurs, “A key aspect of this project is to help kick-start a larger number of NGOs.” The formation of a new NGO in Ningdu County—prompted by the pilot test and now partnering with MRL under the second phase—may foretell bigger things to come, if initiatives, such as this one, help legitimize NGOs as a partner and encourage governments to open access to even a small share of huge state funds, he adds.

A recent monitoring and evaluation report of the pilot project, prepared by the International Development Support Services and the Center for Integrated Agricultural Development, included many encouraging findings.

The first post-baseline survey found that, compared to the control villages (where projects are run entirely by the Government), the pilot projects with NGO involvement were indeed more participatory, involved many more poor persons in analysis, were far more transparent, and built a greater sense of ownership among beneficiaries.
The survey showed that 82% of pilot village respondents were “very satisfied” with the planning processes, compared to 21% in the control villages. In particular, 85% of the women were “very satisfied” with the process, against 6% in the control villages. In the key area of transparency, 26% of pilot villagers could correctly identify how poverty funds were being spent, compared to 6% in control villages.

As a counterpoint, the monitoring and evaluation report raised a serious concern about how difficult and time-consuming it can be to identify the poorest families in a village—and it warns that such identification is not of much use unless it is accompanied by projects that directly benefit them.

This is the most problematic—and controversial—aspect of the project. It has led to conflict in some villages over the distribution of funds—how much should be allocated to help poor households and how much for overall village development. Some better-off villagers believe the very poor lack the capital and skills to sustain income-generating projects.

To be sure, such evaluations often do not capture one of the most important gains of the project—the subjective value of giving voice to the silent.

A visit to Dongfeng winds up in the community center where the feisty Gao Lingxiu makes another appearance. Some of her happiest hours, she confesses, are spent playing cards with her friends. “I’m a great poker player,” she says, chuckling.

During the day, the village’s two-storey center is used for meetings and administrative matters. It also has a library, including a computer with Internet access, where farmers can find information to improve their crops. But it is in the evening when the community center comes alive with men and women gathering to drink, play mahjong or poker, or simply to banter.

“It’s a very good place. It makes our life much happier. We exchange jokes and ideas,” says Ms. Gao of the spacious facility.

“The villagers used to feel disconnected from government-sponsored village projects because they had not participated in them,” says CFPA’s Ellen Liu. “Now it’s the villagers, not only the government, who create and implement programs to improve their village. It’s the villagers who supervise these programs and take ownership in their outcomes. This empowered attitude is resulting in more effective village development and increased villager morale.”

Leaders in Beijing have set the nurturing of a “harmonious society” atop the national agenda. The experience of distant Dongfeng (literally, “east wind”) suggests that empowerment of the disadvantaged will be a cornerstone of progress. Indeed, a wind of change is already blowing in the East.
SELF-HELP IN THE SLUMS
On Sunday mornings, a ritual of almsgiving takes place in the heart of downtown Kolkata that is both poignant and disturbing. A jostling throng, composed primarily of slum residents, joins the pavement dwellers of Sudder Street for the distribution of free food. Women carrying infants, children in rags, and men hobbling on crutches form part of a pitiable parade of the malnourished, the sick, the lame, and the mentally challenged. It is jolting to realize that this crowd makes up only a tiny fraction of the poor people who inhabit the city’s 5,000 registered slums.

Kolkata’s location as a gateway on the Hooghly River between India and much of the rest of Asia, including the People’s Republic of China, helped it to become a commercial and industrial hub—and one of India’s richest cities. But it also sealed its fate as the destination for several mass migrations—in 1947 after Partition, in 1951 following riots in Dhaka and Narayangunge, and in 1971 in the wake of the war that led to the independence of Bangladesh.

Famine, armed conflict, flood, and cyclone have swollen Kolkata’s population many times over in its short, turbulent history. The influx has lessened over the past 2 decades, in part due to a tightening of the border with Bangladesh. But the migrants still come—many of them escaping poverty and discrimination in the neighboring states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

With a few exceptions, metropolitan Kolkata has accepted this ceaseless flow with tolerance and humanity. The result is that half of its 14 million residents—many of them “floating”—live in thousands of highly-congested slums, severely stressing basic services.

Many of the city’s poorest residents lack the skills or opportunity to secure decent jobs, leaving them dependent on charity and free services. But the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are pioneering a development approach that enables slum dwellers to help themselves in resolving a wide range of social and environmental issues.

As a result, self-help groups of women are addressing widespread problems, such as alcohol-fueled domestic violence, children dropping out of school, or girls marrying too young. Women are also learning how to open a bank account, save money, and...
take out a loan to start a business. Some are escaping the
drudgery of working as maids or factory workers by training
as embroiderers or beauticians, or finding work that is more
interesting and rewarding. As a result, many previously
sheltered and withdrawn women are opening up and making
new friends and sharing experiences.

The idea of creating self-help groups began in a roundabout
manner in 1998 when the Government of India asked ADB
for assistance to reverse the environmental degradation in its
largest cities. In response, ADB worked with India to design the
Kolkata Environmental Improvement Project (KEIP), supported
by a $250 million loan.

The thrust of the project is to reduce pollution by revamping
and upgrading dilapidated sewerage and drainage systems
installed by the British Raj some 140 years earlier. Clearly, the
civil works would disrupt lives by digging up roads and desilting
canals, and a capacity-building program was included to
improve KMC’s service delivery system, as well as communities’
access to basic services. This project, funded by a grant of
$42 million by the United Kingdom’s Department for
International Development (DFID), was to have far-reaching
consequences.

The engineers, always under pressure to meet targets, started
excavations in 2004—but this was before a New Delhi-based
umbrella NGO, appointed under KEIP, had been able to explain
to people what was happening. A suspicious public reacted
with anger.

“People became frightened after seeing the roads being dug up
and hearing rumors about a big project. They feared they would
have to move or pay a lot for a new pipe connection. They
took to the streets in protest and brought the project to a halt,”
recalls a KEIP official.
In 2005, the NGO was replaced by a Social Development Unit (SDU) that became an integrated part of KEIP in Kolkata. One urgent task of the new unit, which includes experienced consultants, as well as KMC staffers who can take their acquired expertise back to the municipal corporation, was to inform communities about the inconveniences—and ultimate benefits—the project would bring. Later, its work would extend to providing "hand-holding support" for poorer communities to take steps to improve their quality of life.

In addition, SDU appointed an initial 10 NGOs—later cut back to six—to mobilize and counsel self-help groups, also known as sangha, in nearly 100 slums scattered around the city. It was the first time NGOs had been used in such a project in Kolkata.

"It was extremely difficult persuading women in the slums to meet each other in groups for many are from remote villages and lack education and are shy," recalls Ranjana Dasgupta, an assured but approachable educationalist who is SDU's team leader. "In addition, many women had jobs and were free only after work. To reach them, you needed people with grassroots experience, and lots of patience and commitment."

From the start, the goal was to encourage women to talk more openly about their problems and find solutions by joining self-help groups.

A self-help group might start meeting to solve a practical problem, such as overflowing and filthy toilets. KEIP has rehabilitated hundreds of toilets—with the proviso that user groups pay and assume responsibility for their maintenance. Slum communities have responded positively to this scheme and are happy with the results. Typically, five households share one toilet, with each family contributing Indian rupees Rs5–Rs10 ($0.13–$0.25) a month and an elected woman head using the proceeds to buy cleaning materials and pay for a sweeper to clean the toilet regularly. Users are also given advice on hygiene.

From such a beginning, a self-help group might branch out into other areas. "Once you convince them to meet, it multiplies," says Bipasha Keshri, a sympathetic woman who is a coordinator for CINI ASHA, a unit of the Child In Need Institute (CINI), an NGO that has worked with street children and in the slums since it was established in 1974. "Women can help each other with their pregnancies, they give advice to the expectant mother and organize appointments with the clinic so she doesn’t have to wait in a long queue."
One woman who has benefited from such help is Pushpa Das, a slim, 20-year-old woman. Standing in the doorway of her small, dark shanty in the Kulia Tangra slum, East Kolkata, Pushpa says she married at 18 and went through her first pregnancy without eating properly, or taking any supplements, or even seeing a doctor. Her baby arrived prematurely and underweight—and died less than 2 weeks later.

One reason Pushpa can bear to relate this tale is that she is pregnant again—but with a much better chance of delivering a healthy baby, thanks to a self-help group. This time around, she says, she is getting advice both from a doctor and her sangha. “Since joining the group, I've learned the importance of things like anti-tetanus injections and iron folic acid and how to improve my nutrition.”

NGOs counsel self-help groups about the risks of underage marriage and train adolescent girls to advise their peers. In India, it is illegal for girls to marry before 18, but many wed much younger through an arranged marriage or by eloping. Having babies at 15 or 16 can be life-threatening, says Ms. Keshri. Anemia levels, which are related to diet and can affect pregnancy outcomes, are higher in the slums than outside, she notes. Correspondingly, rates of maternal and infant mortality are higher in the congested settlements, where education, nutrition, and basic health care are often inadequate. In addition, young mothers tend to drop out of school and are unprepared for their new responsibilities.

In Telipara Lane, another slum, Pratima Pramanik, 30, is telling a group of women how desperate she is because her husband drinks what little income he earns as a casual laborer and, when she scolds him, he beats her or leaves the home.

“We have three children between 6 and 9 years old, but they have stopped going to school because we have no money. I don't know what to do,” she says.

Other women, who have been nodding their heads sympathetically as they face the same problem, proffer suggestions. One says if they confront Pratima’s husband as a group, he might take advice more seriously. Another suggestion is to refer the husband to an agency that specializes in alcohol abuse.

The problem is widespread, says Madhuchhanda Deb, a ward counselor with an authoritative but sympathetic air. She reckons as many as four out of five men drink excessively in her ward, largely because of the presence of many vendors of a homemade brew known as chullu or taadi (toddy).

Some self-help groups of women are taking stern preventive actions, such as stopping chullu vendors from entering the neighborhood. One group entered premises where chullu was being brewed and destroyed the vats.

“In one of the wards that we are working in, the women’s group is so strong that the ward councilor says that the men are scared,” says Ms. Dasgupta.

The narrow lanes of Narkeldanga—one of the biggest slums in Central Kolkata with a mixed Muslim and Hindu population of 30,000—are alive with the sounds of whirring machines and hammering as men fashion soles and boxes, slippers and zippers, and dozens of other consumer items out of hole-in-the-wall premises.

A visitor soon becomes a Pied Piper, followed by curious and excited children, some of whom constantly dart in front of a

Opposite page, top:
A slipper-making enterprise in Narkeldanga.

Bottom left:
NGO field worker Roma Sutar (right) talks to a Garfa canal community member.

Bottom right:
Kamal Chakrabarti, leader of a men’s self-help group at Uttar Kalikapur.
camera, keen to be photographed. One of the biggest problems with children in the slums is the high rate of school dropouts. Without education, the children have little choice but to work as casual laborers or turn to petty crime—perpetuating the cycle of ignorance and poverty.

Abusive or uncaring fathers can be a cause of school dropouts. A boy can run away from home after being beaten by his father. Or the father consumes all his earnings on drink, leaving none for his children’s schooling.

“Every night, the husband drinks and bashes his wife. When she asks for money to school the children, the father will say, ‘What will become of studying? Nothing will happen,’” says Rubina Hussain, an intense NGO worker in her early 30s who lives and works in Narkeldanga.

Some social workers categorize any child not at school as “child laborers” and Ms. Hussain works for an NGO that helps to get these children back to the classroom. This often includes organizing a birth certificate for the child, which schools require. Some parents simply have too many children and can’t afford to educate all of them, says Ms. Hussain, who was raised in a “posh” area and was shocked at conditions in Narkeldanga, where she has lived in the area for 10 years since marrying her husband, a resident. She explains that she loves her work since “it brings me close to the people, who tell me about their problems.”

Self-help groups and NGOs keep an eye on slum children and can help dropouts attend NGO-established schools for a period before entering mainstream schools. “These children have high hopes and want to be doctors or lawyers, but the parents are unable to educate them,” says Ms. Hussain.

If street children are not helped by NGOs, they may join gangs to survive, says Ms. Dasgupta, who has worked with street children around railway stations. “They have an inverted code of ethics. They admire a pickpocket because he is using skills, whereas a beggar is regarded as a good-for-nothing. At the same time, they would accompany me as bodyguards to make sure I was safe,” she says. To protect themselves, street
children would sleep with part of a razor blade under their tongue or tucked into a shirt collar for ready use as a weapon.

The women of Narkeldanga often work long hours as maids or in leather factories. To escape such grinding labor, several women in gaily-colored saris gather in a large classroom on the periphery of the slum. They squat on the floor, hunched over cloth that is stretched tightly over a hadda, a bed-like frame. They are engaged in zari embroidery, stitching multicolored beads and sequins to create intricate decorations for saris and dress materials. Many have taken time off from other jobs to attend this 6-month vocational training course, says Aftabuddin Ahmed, coordinator for Tiljala SHED (Society for Human and Educational Development), an NGO.

Once trained, these women, most of them married, can choose to work from home or join a group. They also learn how to market their products.

For Mehzabeen Aftekar, 25, zari embroidery offers fresh hope. She married young, but her husband has left her with an 8-year-old son and a 6-year-old daughter. She earns just Rs50 ($1.27) a day from 12-hour shifts in a washer-making factory, but has taken time off for this course and hopes her new skills will improve her earnings.

In another corner of the classroom, a group of women is listening to a lesson in bookkeeping. In this course, they learn how to open a bank account (and purchase an accident insurance policy), how to save money, and how to approach a bank, either individually or as a group, to borrow money for equipment and materials. In a typical self-help group, says Mr. Ahmad, 10 women each contribute Rs1 a day, generating savings of Rs300 ($7.60) a month. If they stay together for a year, as stipulated by the bank, they become eligible for a loan equivalent to four times their savings.

Significantly, dealing with a commercial bank frees these women—and their families—from the grip of loan sharks that lend money at annual interest rates of 50% or more, trapping many slum dwellers in a never-ending cycle of debt and repayment. Nikhet Parveen, 20, wants to join a self-help group partly so that she can access reasonably-priced loans and help her father, who is in hock to informal moneylenders.

Just as importantly, these women, once shy and confined to the home, become more confident and adventuresome. One group recently raised money and went on a bus trip to find out more about marketing.

Moving into their own home is an impossible wish for most slum dwellers, but it has become a reality for more than 1,400 families under the KEIP project.

The relocation of families has come about through a mixture of pragmatism and altruism. KMC needs to dredge 77 kilometers (km) of clogged canals under its drainage improvement scheme—and this means clearing the embankments of squatters. Altogether, KEIP plans to resettle more than 3,600 families into flats within 2 or 3 km from their original dwellings by dovetailing with an urban renewal scheme that is heavily subsidized by the Government of India. Through this scheme,
qualified squatters pay a maximum of Rs5,000 ($127) for a flat, or less than 5% of its value.

It sounds like a dream, but the reality is that persuading people to move can be a nightmare. One community has lived in shanties along a smelly section of the Garfa canal in southwest Calcutta for 25 years or more. NGOs and consultants of SDU have spent hundreds of hours in discussion with the 136 families that are due to move into new flats sometime in 2008.

“We tell them we are moving them only a few kilometers away, but they are still afraid to leave an area where they earn their livelihood, where they have built relationships, and where their kids go to school,” says Kali Ghosh, a senior consultant on resettlement. “Relocating people is the most difficult part of our work. It’s a slow process.”

“They have all kinds of questions,” affirms Roma Sutar, a young field-worker with the NGO, i-Land Informatics, who spends one morning a week among the community listening to residents’ concerns. “They have heard all kinds of rumors and ask if high-rise buildings will fall in a cyclone. They want to know what kind of fuel can be used for cooking in a flat, how much is the price of cooking gas, and how long a container will last.”

Despite all the consultations, when the community was asked at a recent public meeting whether they wanted to move, most of the vociferous replies were negative. “I’m too old to move,” shouted one stooping, white-haired man from a doorway.

SDU officials were unperturbed by the response, for they know from experience that most residents are pleased once they move into their new surroundings.

Indeed, a visit to an apartment complex at Nonadanga near the wetlands of East Kolkata confirms this. Suchitra Halder, 27, a mother of two, is busy trying to sell saris to neighbors ahead of the Durga Puja festival. She and her family were among 125 households who had transferred several months earlier to new flats from a nearby canal embankment where she had lived for 11 years after marrying her husband, Dipanka.

Her previous home is a 10-minute walk away, and she misses not having her in-laws close by, especially in the evenings and during festivals. But she is happy and her relatives “100% wish they could have an apartment like this,” she says as she walks around the 190-square-foot unit that also has a balcony.

A novel feature of this scheme is that the titles of the flats—which are not transferable—are in the name of the wives. Women are regarded as steadier characters and less likely to
leave the home than men. Informed that this means women can now kick out errant husbands, Ms. Halder replies, “No Bengali woman would think of such a thing.”

Reinforcing the sense of ownership, each apartment block elects representatives who are responsible for the maintenance and security of the building and water pump.

Although KEIP focuses on women and children as the most vulnerable slum dwellers, men are also encouraged to form self-help groups.

At one canal embankment community, in Uttar Kalikapur in the eastern part of the city, 21 men with limited incomes formed a self-help group 2 years ago to pool their modest resources. With small monthly contributions from members, the group opened a bank account and has aspirations of one day taking out a loan to invest in a Tata Sumo van, which they can rent out. Moreover, once they register as a cooperative, they may later qualify for government grants for communal facilities.

In the meantime, says Kamal Chakrabarti, the group’s mustachioed president, they have organized social and sports events, as well as eye care clinics and an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign for the community. The women in this district once had a self-help group, but let it lapse. However, they are sufficiently inspired by the men to consider reviving their group, says Subroto Dey, a coordinator with i-Land Informatics.
Self-help groups are also improving the physical quality of life. Building on the success of persuading user groups to pay small fees to keep their new toilets in good running order, the next step is to apply the same principle to water supply. Kolkata suffers from erratic water supply, and studies show that the poor are willing to pay for reliable and safe water. Accordingly, under KEIP, there are plans to install 100,000 water meters in selected communities, including slums, city-wide from 2008.

“Slum dwellers have been getting a lot of things free and, as a result, they believe they are not able to do something for themselves. We want to change that attitude. If you want an improved quality of life, you need to change the mindset,” says Ms. Dasgupta. It has been an uphill battle getting communities on board with the idea, as one major obstacle has been local politicians who “promise voters free this and free that, but fail to deliver.”

After only 2 years, the work of the project’s SDU and its NGOs has been praised as examples of best practice. NGOs have played a key role in mobilizing self-help groups and getting them on their feet, and Ms. Dasgupta is confident that such groups will continue on their own after KEIP is completed around 2010. “This is absolutely the aim of the project,” says Ms. Dasgupta. “The fact that KMC has staff in the social development unit will help ensure continuity.”

The development agencies, ADB and DFID, hope that the successful use of self-help groups will be replicated in other slums. Encouragingly, not long after setting up the social development unit under KEIP, KMC established its own social sector department, with the ambitious task of mobilizing self-help groups in all the 141 wards and 5,000 slums under its purview.

“We are the first municipal corporation in India to do this,” says Sahidul Islam, a man with a go-getting reputation who worked in KEIP before being promoted to KMC’s Joint Municipal Commissioner, responsible for capacity building.

Thus far, the 30-odd staff in KMC’s social department has enabled self-help groups in 57 wards to register as societies, or NGOs, in order to qualify for government assistance and funds.

However, the big difference between the approach KMC is implementing through ADB- and DFID-financed KEIP and its own operations is that it is not using NGOs to mobilize self-help groups. Even with KEIP, the original number of implementing
NGOs has been reduced from 10 to six, and NGOs are retained on 6-month contracts, which makes long-term planning difficult.

“The government tends to focus on the physical side and pays less attention to the social side where the benefits are less visible,” notes Ms. Dasgupta. “KMC has a lot of targets but not so many staff to implement them at ground level. They are still to understand how NGOs can be their extension.”

KEIP’s project director, Santanu Basu, an Indian Administrative Service officer, says that, as the person responsible for delivering results, “About 85% or 90% of our time is focused on sewage and drainage.” But he also acknowledges the “inevitable” role of NGOs.

“We (at KMC) have engineers and administrators, and sewerage and drainage are our function and we are good at it,” he says. “But there are land and relocation issues involving people, and we have not, traditionally, been involved in this and we are not good at this. These issues need to be handled carefully so we have to have our social development unit take care of these with NGOs. We hire NGOs that are local to the area and are known to the people.”

A benefit monitoring and evaluation report on KEIP, dated July 2007, underscores this point.

The report, prepared by Infrastructure Professionals Enterprise Ltd., India, commends a chronically beleaguered KMC—which has seen staff levels fall to 35,000 from 41,000 in 1999—for continuing to service a relentlessly growing volume of clients. But it also notes that, “NGO involvement is an area, which definitely needs to be tapped to reach out to the vulnerable communities and delegate the ‘soft’ components of development initiatives (awareness creation, consensus building, and participatory approaches, etc.) that KMC lacks.”

It makes the additional point that, “NGOs also act as watcheyes for ensuring the inclusion of the poor communities in overall municipal planning. KMC needs to adopt a more receptive approach to engaging them as partners in development.”

It was not long ago that responsibility for urban management was devolved from state to municipal level. KMC is struggling to get to grips with greater responsibilities, as well as to reform an administration still burdened by a colonial legacy. By taking on partners that can help deliver vital services more effectively, the corporation would also be helping itself.
HARVESTING NEW IDEAS
Guntrano, a tiny village famous for its sweet-tasting red onions, had high expectations of a bumper crop in 2007. Its sandy soil—for the hamlet lies just east of Palu Bay in Central Sulawesi—yields onions of such delectable flavor that they fetch three times the price of regular onions.

In one of the driest parts of Indonesia, the community had little hesitation in choosing, among village improvement projects, an irrigation scheme that would increase both the village’s onion yield and its cultivable land. Its 349 households clubbed together and paid nearly one third of the cost to bring water by pipeline from a nearby river. They also agreed to maintain the system.

But on 15 July 2007, a worried farmer came to see Yahya Toto, one of the village’s leading farmers, to report a strange phenomenon. He had found tiny eggs on the leaves of an onion plant. Yahya, a sprightly veteran of 65, hurried down to his field to take a look. “The flies had a sharp tail that pierced the leaves and they left eggs within the leaves,” he recalls. “I had never seen anything like it in 40 years of farming, but I thought it might be serious.”

It was, indeed. The “seedling fly,” as it was soon dubbed by locals, turned out to be a pest that had attacked rice and corn elsewhere in the province but had not been known to affect onions. Yahya reported the matter to the village head who, in turn, sounded alarm bells among local government circles.

As a stop-gap solution, villagers planted sticky boards in the soil that acted like fly-traps. Thousands of flies soon piled up like sand around the base of these planks. But this did not solve the problem. Flies destroyed 20 hectares of crops, nearly a quarter of the village’s newly-expanded watered lands.

At Guntrano, under the shade of trees, villagers are voicing their dilemma at a meeting, while in a neighboring field, a farmer continues to wield his plow behind a brace of oxen.

“We don’t know whether or not to plant more seedlings,” one villager tells the gathering, which includes representatives of the national and district governments, and a nongovernment organization (NGO) that has helped villagers form a village
organization. “If we plant them, we might lose them to the pest. If we don’t, the seedlings will die, anyway.”

The question draws no solution from an official of the Government’s Agricultural Institute for Assessment Technology, who says the issue needs to be addressed by a field school on pest management. Such a school has been planned for the district, but hasn’t yet been set up, he adds.

The incident underscores how impoverished Indonesian farmers badly need technical assistance in combating crop disease, as well as poor soil, drought, and flood. But, as importantly, it also reflects how communities, like Guntarano, are becoming more involved in choosing, planning, and implementing their own projects. For, once their pest crisis is behind them, the farmers of Guntarano will reap the benefits of their initiative and labor.

Guntarano is one of over 1,000 marginal villages—scattered over Central Java and East and West Nusa Tenggara provinces, as well as Central Sulawesi—that are taking part in a Poor Farmers Income Improvement Through Innovation Project, financed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) with a $56 million soft loan. The project began in 2003 and is expected to continue till 2009.

As well as working with local government and NGOs to encourage self-help among farmers, the project is bringing simple, easily-applicable technologies for farmers to diversify crops and improve yields.

The bottom-up approach is aligned with the massive shift towards decentralization that has taken place since the fall of the Suharto government in 1998. Protests from regional authorities that they were not getting a fair share of revenues from a highly centralized administration led to legislation the following year that devolved much responsibility to sub-provincial or district government.

The consequences were swift and far-reaching for the government of a population of 235 million people spread across an archipelago of 14,000 islands. Thousands of central civil servants were re-assigned and more than 16,000 public service facilities handed over to the regions. A new intergovernment fiscal system was put in place. Despite the mammoth task, the transition took place without a major disruption in government services.

For agriculture, the move to give villages more responsibility to manage their own affairs relieves local government of a task it could not have carried out effectively, anyway.

“Our experience with agriculture projects has shown that you need a lot of flexibility at the village level. Each community village has its own needs, economic and social circumstances change over time, and plans have to be adjusted accordingly,” says Jamil Rahman, an ADB Principal Project Management
Specialist looking after the project. “Local government simply doesn’t have the time or resources to micro manage development at the village level. Getting villagers more involved is also the only way to make sure that projects continue to work after they are completed.”

The ADB-financed project can provide grants of up to US$30,000 for development projects for each village, but requires communities to contribute 20% of the cost, in cash or in kind, to acquire a sense of ownership. The funds are administered by village investment committees, set up under the project with members elected by villagers. The project also engages NGOs to guide village representatives on how to prioritize between projects, implement them, and maintain the facilities.

Three out of five Indonesians dwell in rural areas, where farming is the main occupation. Their need for assistance is beyond doubt. “The quality of life for nearly 90% of the rural poor is “very low, with one third of infants malnourished and half of the women suffering from micronutrient deficiencies,” according to a report written to prepare the ADB-financed project. Moreover, bad health and illiteracy—four fifths of rural residents have less than 5 years of formal education—make it difficult for poor people to find employment, the report adds.

The situation is especially dire in marginal, rain-fed areas, such as the drier eastern half of Indonesia. “Technology development for these areas has lagged far behind that for well-endowed irrigated areas. Government support does not adequately address location-specific, village-level causes of low and unstable yields and inadequate market access,” notes the ADB report.

Some of the very factors that create the need for help—such as remote location and low capacity—also make it difficult to extend assistance.

“This is a bold project that was willing to take a risk in implementing a participatory project during a time of transition when no one was ready for it, neither the government, nor the NGOs, nor the farmers, nor the community,” says Eko Ananto, the Jakarta-based program coordinator from the Ministry of Agriculture’s Indonesian Agency for Agricultural Research and Development, the project’s executing agency.

“The situation is especially dire in marginal, rain-fed areas, such as drier eastern Indonesia”
Mr. Eko likes to tell a story to illustrate the fundamental mindset this innovative project is trying to change. When he was working on a project in swampy areas in Riau in the mid-1990s, bags of fertilizer were left on the road for farmers to collect—but the bags remained on the road because the farmers said they could not transport them home.

“They were so used to the government doing everything for them that they could not think of a way to take the fertilizer home,” he says. “This attitude is still entrenched and is our biggest obstacle.”

The man tasked with coordinating the project on the ground in Central Sulawesi could not agree more. “Sometimes one village gets jealous because they see another village is getting a road repaired or an irrigation project. They ask me, ‘How come we’re not getting the same treatment?’” says Dahli Masahuri, head of the project implementing unit for 239 villages in Donggala district. “I have to tell them that’s not how it works any more. We are not treating villages in a uniform manner, as we did before. Under the new approach, villagers have to come up with projects that best meet their needs. But it takes time for people to understand this and you have to keep reminding them.”

The other major challenge is the lack of capacity or preparedness on the part of stakeholders in implementing the project. At least partly because of the swiftness of “Big Bang” decentralization, the project is a continuing learning experience for the parties.

For example, the project engages national and local NGOs to help develop local capacity at the community level, but both government and villagers harbor concerns about NGOs. “There are still NGOs that believe that helping the community means they have to challenge the government. Am I expecting too much by thinking NGOs and government have different roles but can work in partnership?” asks Mr. Eko. He also says some NGOs are lacking in the very skills—such as financial reporting—that they are supposed to pass on to communities.

It also takes time for communities to adjust to NGOs. “The Suharto government set up its own NGOs, or GONGOs, which are still around and local communities are suspicious of them,” says Ayun Sundari, an ADB external relations and civil society liaison officer based in Jakarta.

For their part, the NGOs concede they have a lot of difficulty finding the right field staff to mobilize and organize the villagers, a task for which leadership is crucial.
“We have strict criteria for village facilitators,” says Sumadi, director of the NGO Rosontapura, which handles the project’s field work in Central Sulawesi. The NGO requires field staff to be university graduates with work experience, preferably from the area.

He says they started off with only 14 field staff, which meant each person had to look after about 17 villages. They have since tripled the number of staff, but he admits he is happy with only 75% of his field personnel.

Clearly, in villages with high illiteracy rates, it is not easy to teach subjects, such as bookkeeping, management, project reporting, and proposal writing, says Akhyar Mahmud, head of Pudjananti Indonesia, an NGO that has overall responsibility for the project in the province.

“Some villagers are making progress, though others are not yet up to standard,” he says. “There is a long way to go before they can manage without support.”

Clearly, much depends on a village’s leaders and its degree of cohesion.

Cocoa, for example, is the commodity that binds the inhabitants of Tolongano, an isolated hamlet 62 kilometers from the provincial capital of Palu. Much of the village lies on a narrow thread of road, with green paddy fields on either side. Cocoa thrives in the nearby hills that are unsuitable for growing rice.

“Cocoa brought us together even before the project,” says Agus Susilohadi, the confident, slightly-built leader of a farmers’ group that has gathered in a small concrete hut. “We got together 5 years ago to learn about fighting pests. Then we formed a cooperative to buy pesticides and fertilizers in bulk, saving on transport costs and cutting out the middle man.”

Outside, the equatorial sun is drying carpets of reddish cloves and blanketing the village with a languid torpor. Dogs lie lazily in the street and even the children play in a muted, desultory way. Inside, under a whirring fan, the farmers recall how the village reached its first democratic decision after a community-based organization was set up under the project.
They had no difficulty choosing the priority project—a road extension that would reach deeper into the cocoa hills. The question that turned into a protracted debate was how long it would be. First, there was a proposal to make it 3 kilometers. Then villagers realized there were not enough funds for this, so they cut the length in half. Then some farmers insisted it reach their land, so the road was lengthened to 1.8 kilometers.

The result is a road that, since it was completed in November 2006, has saved time and money for everyone. No longer do sacks of rice and cocoa have to be carried from many small farms to the main road or fertilizer and pesticides borne the other way. As importantly, the new road has brought another school within easier reach. Earlier, many children had to travel by river and road to another school, a lengthier journey that could also be hazardous. One child had drowned in an accident.

Encouragingly, as a signal of their ownership, Tolongano villagers contributed 115 million rupiah ($11,500) toward the road, or more than 30% of the total cost, way above the 20% target. Signifying their commitment, some farmers gave up part of their land, including trees, for the road.

In addition, villagers say they appreciated the role of the NGO representative, Syahruddin, during discussions. “He helped us analyze the social and economic costs and benefits of the project,” says one villager. “If one of us comes up with an idea, people might not trust that person, thinking he or she has some agenda. But if an NGO suggests an idea, it is from the point of view of the village as a whole.”

The road is making life more convenient, but it is a new technique for lifting cocoa production that is really causing a stir of excitement among Tolongano’s 849 households. A basic technology, known as side-grafting, is being disseminated under the project and has the potential to lift many farmers above the poverty line. This is a big deal in Tolongano, where 40% of the families subsist on less than 1 million rupiah ($100) a year.

One of the villagers, Mandong Kana, a sturdy, soft-spoken man, steps forward to demonstrate the revolutionary technique. He squats beside a mature cocoa tree and, with a sharp knife, lops off a branch. Then, he picks up a 4-centimeter-long seedling and carefully implants it into the wound left by the severed branch. Next, he deftly wraps a plastic bag around the fragile seedling, protecting it until it takes root and grows stronger.
His surgery complete, Mr. Mandong stands up and says the new branch will soon be capable of producing up to 300 fruit a year, compared to about 80 from the branch it replaced.

Since learning this technique from an NGO training course 2 years earlier, Mr. Mandong has applied it to his own cocoa trees. The result: yields from 1,000 cocoa trees have soared to more than 3,000 kilograms annually from 300 kilograms a year. As a bonus, he adds, the transplanted branches are lower and shorter, making them easier to harvest.

Mr. Mandong, 38, whose parents migrated to this region from Bugis when he was a child, has become something of a local hero in a few short years. Not long ago, he was a landless laborer, working for a cocoa farmer. After 3 years, he received a small parcel of land as payment for his labor and, from such beginnings, he steadily acquired other lots. He now has 4 hectares and hires help to harvest them. He is talking of putting his four children through college.

Despite its obvious benefits, the conservative community has been slow to embrace the concept of side-grafting. “Some farmers didn’t like the idea cutting off branches of a cocoa tree that was still producing,” he explains. However, as the practice gains support, Mr. Mandong and a couple of other farmers are now marketing their skills as “cocoa tree doctors.” Typically, he buys a seedling for 5,000 rupiah ($127) and cuts it into four pieces, each good for one transplant. In turn, Mr. Mandong charges clients 5,000 rupiah per new branch.

As well as boosting cocoa production in Central Sulawesi, the project has, so far, improved banana growing and coconut processing in other areas. In East Lombok, it has doubled farmer incomes as a result of introducing high-yielding banana varieties and raising productivity with intercropping and better use of inputs. In Ende, the project has brought in technology to process desiccated coconut, fermented coconut oil, coconut water sauce and syrup, and even coconut charcoal.

In Tolongano, community building has, so far, worked well, according to villagers, while avoiding one of the bigger project risks. To promote equity and to reach the poor, the project prohibits the village head—or any of the village management—from standing as candidates for the new investment committee. Clearly, this has the potential of causing a split between traditional leaders and the new guard spearheading the project. Mr. Dahli, the district boss, says he frequently gets caught in the middle of fights between the village head and the new investment committees.

One of the problems NGOs are encountering is that, while some villages accept ownership while implementing a project, their interest wanes after it is completed.

Such is the case in Limboro, a mainly rice-growing settlement a few kilometers from Tolongano. In a rain-fed area, Limboro is lucky to have a nearby river as a source of irrigation water.
In 2005, Limboro’s citizens, who also grow coconuts and sago, agreed to shoulder nearly 60 million rupiah ($1.52 million), or more than 20% of the cost, of rehabilitating an irrigation system that had fallen into disrepair.

Their investment paid off handsomely. By expanding the land under cultivation, using better seeds, and improving planting techniques, incomes from rice farming rose by nearly 150%, according to an initial impact assessment report of the Ministry of Agriculture in 2006.

It had also been agreed that members of a 70-strong farmers’ group would contribute 2.5% of their harvest toward maintaining the irrigation infrastructure.

When it came time to pay, however, more than half the farmers found excuses not to do so. The result was a dispute that went on for several months and was still unresolved by late 2007.

Standing by a rice field, members of a farmers’ group and an NGO representative go back and forth, reviewing the arguments. Even before the agreement, there had been lively discussion over the amount of the contribution. Some members had proposed giving 5% of the harvest, but this had been cut in half after others said they would not be able to pay.

Since the breakdown of the agreement, some blame the NGO for a lack of leadership in not being able to get farmers to form a consensus. In reply, the NGO representative says he tried to call meetings on several occasions, but they were poorly attended. Others blame the deadlock on farmers who are still gripped by the old attitude of dependency and want the government to fix the system. One man suggests going around to farmers and collecting their contribution at harvest time, rather than waiting for farmers to submit their share. Another wonders if the contribution should be lowered to 1%. The talk goes around and around, like a buzzing mosquito.

Despite being stalled on one front, Limboro is also the site for one of the project’s attempts to introduce innovation. Ahyar Salman, 35, one of the village’s management committee, is pilot testing a scheme to use cow dung for cooking as an alternative to the more expensive kerosene.
Standing by an enormous plastic balloon-like bag, Ahyar explains the mechanics of the process. A handful of cows, kept in a pen next to the balloon, provide the raw material. The product, biogas, travels through pipes to a special stove in the house, about 25 meters away. The project paid $300, says Ahyar, for the basic equipment, including a regulator.

In the kitchen, his sister Murtiyani wields a wok over the biogas stove to prepare a meal. It works “okay,” she says, and is much cheaper than using kerosene.

However, the experiment has been slow to catch on. Ahyar has been operating the biogas scheme for 7 months but, so far, only two families have shown sufficient interest to be connected to his system. One drawback to the scheme, he says, is that the cows need to be confined so their waste can be easily collected. Most farmers prefer to let their cows roam.

Checkpoints and soldiers serve as a reminder of long-running tensions in Central Sulawesi that do not make development projects any easier to implement. The friction, mainly between indigenous Christians and migrant Muslims, is centered in Poso district but has sometimes spilled over into neighboring Donggala. The conflict has brought much aid money to this region which, in turn, has significantly widened the opportunities for corruption. Donggala has the dubious distinction of being among the districts with the highest amounts of unaccounted funds, according to a state audit in 2006.

To guard against anomalies, including interference from local politicians, the ADB-financed project channels most of the funds through village organizations. Mr. Eko says that several mechanisms—including “open” bank accounts that can be scrutinized by villagers—are in place to make sure funds are properly used and accounted for.

Implemented in stages, the project had covered 589 villages by the end of 2006, leaving a balance of 464 villages. To make up for earlier delays, the project was extended until 2009.

“\To guard against anomalies, funds are channeled through village organizations”\n

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Above: Murtiyani prepares a meal over a biogas stove: It is cheaper and cleaner than using kerosene.

Opposite page: Limboro farmer Ahyar Salman has an innovative use for cow dung: Turning animal waste into clean fuel.
“People call me at all hours and are very bold in voicing their needs and demands”

So far, despite stumbling blocks in implementation, the project has earned a “satisfactory” rating. High scores of more than 50% were recorded in the project’s financial internal rate of return—an indicator of benefit over cost—according to an initial impact assessment. This was attributable to a “substantial increase in farm productivity and incremental benefits,” says the report, which was based on a sample of 42 villages, or 10% of the villages where the project had been completed by December 2005.

“While the project was behind in implementation, activities so far have been largely successful in generating the intended benefits,” says ADB’s Mr. Rahman. He also points to a higher-than-expected level of commitment by villages. “The average share of 28.3% provided through in-kind contribution to financing village investments exceeds the target of 20%,” he says.

On the debit side, officials concede that the project has so far not delivered one of its main goals—to increase the ability of farmers to market their products. It had been hoped that the project would provide farmers with web-based information about prices, but this has been thwarted in a country with unreliable Internet services and irregular power supply.

“The idea is to provide market information through the central Ministry of Agriculture web site. Some effort has been made, but we have to admit this is the weakest part of the project,” says Mr. Eko, of the national ministry. “Even in Java, some ministry offices don’t have regular Internet access and others have web sites that haven’t been updated for years. The big picture is not rosy.” As a result, farmers still rely on traditional but slower media, such as local newspapers, radio, and television.

As a result of early assessments, some remedial actions will be taken during the remainder of the project. For example, although the project has brought technology applications to farmers, further steps will be taken to improve the flow of technical advice, including setting up a pilot Sub-district Agricultural Information Center in Donggala.

Also, project staff concede that the target of delivering at least half the benefits to the poor has not been met, and district coordination committees will step up efforts in this direction.
To ensure sustainability, the village organizations created under the project need to continue and grow stronger. Some villages with weak entities will need repeat training. If communities require support when the project is over, the NGOs point out that they can be engaged as service providers.

Sometimes, when he feels at a low ebb, Mr. Eko is overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenges. “There are a lot of stakeholders involved and a lot of people who need to be empowered. Actually, empowering the community is the easy part,” he says. He also sometimes wonders about the consistency of the government’s commitment to the bottom-up approach.

In 2007, the Indonesian Government launched a National Community Empowerment Program to extend the community-driven development approach to all the country’s 70,000 villages. Although this is clearly a strong endorsement of the participatory approach, Mr. Eko notes that the central government is still supporting some old-style development projects that lack any requirement for community empowerment.

To Mr. Dahli, however, who was born into a local farming family and relates well to farmers, there is little doubt which way the wind is blowing. “People call me at all hours, and I go to workshops where villagers are very bold in voicing their needs and demands,” he says. “In the past, people used to accept whatever the government gave them. Not any more. I even know one village that refused to accept a program the local agriculture office offered them. There’s a huge difference between now and a decade ago.”

In the end, much will rest on gritty individuals like Yahya Toto, who has become one of Guntarano’s better-off farmers after decades of enterprise. He strips off his shirt in the baking sun and kneels down to yank some red onions from the soil. The unexpected attack on his crops will cost him 6 million rupiah ($600), a small fortune by local standards. But, as he tilts his black cap to ward off the sun, he is already looking beyond the crisis.

“I used to get three harvests a year, but now that we have our new irrigation system, I expect to increase this to four or five.” Those who find the taste of Guntarano’s onions irresistible will not be disappointed.
FRUITS OF RESILIENCE
It is a regular social gathering, though with a difference. A journalist, a teacher, a sportsman, and a singer are among friends who are catching up on gossip and telling stories at the community center in Ulaanbaatar.

The newspaper editor is talking about the extra work required to bring out a bumper issue of his monthly publication—he has only two colleagues and does much of the reporting and editing himself.

The teacher has caught up with a former pupil and the two women are discussing the latter’s plans to open her own training center for making handicrafts. The sportsman is relating how he competed in a marathon race abroad. The singer, who performs in concerts and wedding parties, says he got into music only through some friends in a band.

What distinguishes this get-together, however, is that it is taking place on the premises of the Mongolian National Federation of Disabled People. Almost everyone here has a disability, which means that regular activities—like earning a living or going from one place to another—pose challenges that others never have to think about.

For example, the editor, Baast Orgodol, walks unsteadily and his face creases into a lop-sided grin as he talks. This is the result of a congenital disease that left him partially paralyzed, with impaired speech and hearing. The teacher, Myadag Chogjmaa, has had one leg shorter than the other since she was born. The athlete, Purevjal Tumurbataar, is in a wheelchair with permanent back and leg injuries after being struck by a car. The singer, Jagar Baasanjav, uses powerful arms to vault himself into a chair—he lost the lower half of his body after being run over by a train.

Such handicaps are not their only burden. They also have to struggle against an invisible, yet often more hurtful, obstacle—entrenched prejudice by society against a minority of people who were born with an abnormality or have been maimed in an accident.

Long treated as outcasts, Mongolia’s disabled were especially vulnerable when the economy collapsed in the 1990s. A pilot ADB-financed project, strongly backed by the Government and implemented by plucky NGOs, helped alter public attitudes, as well as increase the income-earning potential of the disabled.

With new skills, many are holding their own in mainstream society.

Opposite page:
She uses a crutch, but she is also skilled: Nineteen-year-old Nayanbuu Delgerkhishig operates a glove-making machine in Ulaanbaatar.
Orgodol is 38, old enough to have grown up in an era of Soviet influence when babies with even minor physical and mental abnormalities were commonly separated from mothers and put into special institutions, schools, and factories from which few emerged. Considering he went to a school for children with mental disabilities, it says much about Orgodol’s spirit that he not only survived such a system but obtained a scholarship in his early 30s to study journalism at a university.

Life did not become any easier after Mongolia’s shift toward democracy in 1990. Joblessness soared among the general population of 2.5 million as Soviet-backed enterprises cut back or folded. Even today, despite economic growth, one in three Mongolians earns less than $1 a day. Poverty is even more pervasive among Mongolia’s estimated 115,000 disabled. Of the 40,000 or so who are capable of work, more than 80% cannot find jobs, which leaves them having to survive on meager disability allowances of $30 a month.

To help develop social safety nets for the poor, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) prepared a Social Security Sector Development Program in 2001. Out of the relationships formed during this program came an idea for a pilot project for the disabled.

“People with disabilities were among the very poorest of the poor, in large part because they were not regarded, or treated, as normal members of society,” says Robert Schoellhammer, an ADB Principal Liaison Specialist who, in his 20s, had worked for nearly 3 years in the Government’s civil service training institute in Ulaanbaatar and speaks Russian and Mongolian. “They were outside the legal structure. To start treating them as normal members of society, there had to be changes in the social security, education, and housing systems, for example.”

An experimental project for Expanding Employment Opportunities for Poor Disabled Persons began a year later. It was funded by a $1 million grant from ADB’s Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction, set up specifically to explore...
innovative methods of aiding poor people. The Government, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), the private sector, and disabled people contributed another $200,000, mostly in kind.

Crucially, the project had the strong backing of the Government, with two people in particular helping to drive it. Tugsjargal Gandhi is a charismatic Member of Parliament and former investigative journalist with a gift for persuasion and a wide range of contacts. Sodnom Chinzorig is Vice-Minister of Social Welfare and Labor, a solid, hardworking career civil servant. He took a hands-on role as director of the project implementation unit.

“One of our top priorities was to change social attitudes toward the disabled. We wanted to show they could be useful and productive members of society, not as people generally perceived them,” says Mrs. Gandhi in a reception room in Parliament. She knows the disabled well as a one-time head of the National Federation of Disabled People.

Mrs. Gandhi was in a good position to raise public awareness about the disabled. She had first caught the public eye during the era of Soviet influence as a courageous journalist in the military who wrote exposés about higher-ups. Few dared to challenge the authorities, and Mrs. Gandhi was questioned several times by police after complaints by her bosses. She believes she might have been jailed but for the change in the political regime.

Mongolia held its first democratic elections in July 1990, a giant step toward true independence for the first time after centuries of being dominated by its giant neighbors. Amid a roller-coaster political scene, which has seen her party in and out of power, Mrs. Gandhi has remained popular enough to have won election for four successive terms.

With her media background, Mrs. Gandhi helped spark a nationwide campaign for the disabled through television, radio, and print. Television, for example, featured a series about people who had overcome their handicaps. Newspapers
opened their columns to poems and essays by the disabled. Mainstream journalists were encouraged to report on a much-neglected part of society.

Photogenic, as well as articulate, Mrs. Gandhi took her crusade to television, on one occasion extracting a pledge from employers to engage disabled people. In another well-publicized initiative, she persuaded administrators from several universities to offer scholarships or sharply reduce tuition fees for disabled students.

The Government also declared 2002 as the year of the disabled. This was followed by high-profile events that included presenting awards to disabled people who had achieved distinction in various fields.

“Attitudes are improving, though it’s a slow process that takes a long time,” says Mrs. Gandhi, adding that she has noticed change even within her family.

“My husband would ask why I was working so much with disabled people. He asked what benefit I got from it as I was already known,” says Mrs. Gandhi. But, as her spouse grew more familiar with her work—his car was often used to ferry disabled people and their apartment once became a storehouse for crutches—he became much more supportive.

Another major drive was to change legislation to improve conditions in the labor market and housing sector.

Much early attention focused on changing the Mongolian legal terminology for the disabled. The previous phrase, *tahir dutuu*, was derogatory, meaning “incapable.” After workshops with linguistic experts and government officials, the official description was altered to *hogjliin berkhsheltei*, which means “people with difficulties.”

One important step toward improving conditions for the disabled, says Mr. Chinzorg, was to change the labor code so that enterprises with 50 workers or more are now required to engage disabled persons for at least 3% of staff positions. Many employers still do not comply with this rule, preferring to pay a fine—equal to 1 month’s salary of $80—that goes to an employment promotion fund for the disabled.

Changes are under process, too, in the building code to include disabled-friendly features in new buildings. This is especially needed in schools and training centers that the disabled often cannot attend because the facilities lack ramps or lifts for wheelchairs and specially-fitted toilets.
While lawmakers were effecting policy changes from the top, the ADB-financed project set ambitious targets on the ground. One was to find jobs or income-earning opportunities for 4,000 disabled persons, or 10% of those who were able to work. It aimed to achieve this in six provinces, including the capital.

The goal sparked initial exuberance—though this was followed by a sobering reality check. “People had very high expectations of the project, but they didn’t have the skills that matched the market,” says Bavuusuren Bayasgalan, an ADB social sectors officer who helped implement the project. “Under the Soviet system of segregated education, disabled children went to special schools and most didn’t go beyond secondary schools, lacking access to tertiary education.”

To achieve its aims, the project had to train NGOs that help the disabled. The NGOs, staffed almost entirely by disabled persons, needed to function more efficiently as organizations and develop the capability to provide skills training and find jobs for their clients.

This was a formidable task for, as Ms. Bayasgalan notes, “the NGOs’ capacity was very weak at the beginning of the project.” However, the NGOs grasped the opportunity eagerly—and were quick to learn.
Members of the National Federation of Disabled People, as well as some 20 member NGOs attended 6-month courses on topics, such as leadership, management, problem analysis and solving, financial planning, and fund raising. As a result, most of the NGOs are today running on their own and many have expanded their reach and activities since the project ended in 2005.

“We have strengthened our role as a bridge between our members and Parliament,” says Tseden Oyunbaatar, a tall, spare academic who has been the federation’s president since 2004. The federation now counts 29 MPs in its parliamentary lobby group. It also has branches in the capital’s nine districts, as well as all 21 provinces—a cohesive network is important in a country the size of France with a sparse and spread-out population.

Since September 2006, the federation has also occupied expanded premises that serve as a community center, as well as administrative headquarters. It is also largely self-sustaining, says Mr. Oyunbaatar. Half of its income comes from contributions as a result of writing proposals to international and national organizations, 20% from fees paid by its 2,000 members, and 10% from its small factory that produces wool and cashmere gloves. The federation does receive funds from the Government, but mainly for carrying out projects.

Mr. Oyunbaatar, 48, understands better than most how important it is, especially in terms of confidence, to get on one’s feet. Fourteen years earlier, he was a lecturer at the Science and Technological University when he was knocked down by a drunk driver. Bedridden for 2 years with a broken back and hip, he admits those were dark times. But he fought back and, today, with the help of a cane for walking, he is teaching at a technical college and pursuing a doctoral degree, as well as helping his co-afflicted.

Some 80% of disabled people incur their injuries in an accident and they find it especially hard to be treated as outcasts when they are still the same person inside, says Mr. Oyunbaatar. His is a tale of resilience that finds many echoes among the wheelchair-bound, the blind, and others.

Mr. Tumurbaatar, still a competitive athlete at 51, was a student when he was struck by a car more than 30 years ago and left severely disabled. He, too, came back from the brink of despair to finish university and work as an accountant. In 2001, he founded a wheelchair association that now has 2,000 members.
His NGO runs a factory that repairs wheelchairs and trains members in a range of income-earning activities, such as playing the electric piano or guitar, handicraft making, sewing, and manufacturing milk products such as yoghurt. Clearly entrepreneurial, Mr. Tumurbaatar says his NGO has signed an agreement with a school to supply milk products.

He points to his friend, Mr. Baasanjav, as a product of music training. A barrel-chested man with a broad smile, Mr. Baasanjav worked on the railways in the 1970s but, after a breakdown in the signaling system, was sliced in two by a train. Since the accident, besides becoming an entertainer, the indomitable Mr. Baasanjav has married and is father of a daughter.

A similarly feisty spirit is Ariuntuya, a 35-year-old visually impaired masseuse and member of the Mongolian Association of the Blind. Talking in the Braille library, a facility for which she campaigned, Ariuntuya recalls the day she joined a demonstration by the blind on 15 October 2003—White Cane Day—to protest that a string of grievances had not been met.

She was the only woman in a group of seven that took part in a 72-hour hunger strike outside the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labor. “We demanded a Braille library, better books and specialist teachers for a school for the blind, and improved conditions for masseuses,” she says, taking a break from listening to an audiotape of speeches by Prime Minister Nambar Enkhbayar. Married to an electrician husband, Ariuntuya has one son and earns about 350,000 togrog a month. The hunger campaign paid off, she says with a smile, for most of their demands were met.

Such demonstrations, inconceivable under an earlier regime, reflect the openness of today’s Mongolia, as well the distinctive qualities of a hardy, traditionally nomadic people. “Democracy is alive and well in Mongolia. The people are outspoken, individualistic, and self-reliant,” says Adrian Ruthenberg, ADB’s country director in Mongolia. “They are down-to-earth and are not impressed by those with wealth or influence.”

Sometimes, skills training simply helped individuals to improve their lives. Enktur Seded, 42, for example, paralyzed after a logging accident, used to stay at home doing very little.
These days, as a result of training under the project, he repairs watches from a kiosk in a market and makes an average of about 5,000 togrog a day.

Often, however, training has a multiplier effect. Myadag Chogimaa, for example, used to be a freelance trainer who would knock on people’s doors and offer home instruction. Hired under the project to establish a training center, today she heads her own agency. With ties to the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labor, the agency has 30 instructors, a mix of staff and contractuals who, so far, have trained some 5,400 students, of whom 40% are disabled, around the country. In turn, some former students now aspire to teach others. Bat Chuluundolgor, after being left paralyzed by a falling log at 16, is one of Ms. Chogimaa’s former pupils. She learned how to make knitted products under the ADB-financed program, is now a teacher, and is working toward the goal of opening her own training center.

In all, the NGOs provided training for nearly 2,000 people, including courses that used Braille and sign language for those with special needs. But they could not meet all the requests of their clients. “Most of our students wanted English and computer introductory courses, but the market demand for these skills wasn’t there,” says ADB’s Ms. Bayasgalan.

Project officers soon learned, too, that it is one thing to provide skills training but quite another challenge to find jobs for their clients. “Employers were not always positive or even hospitable, their training providers often didn’t have a disabled-friendly environment, and there was a dearth of training materials,” says Ms. Bayasgalan, listing the main difficulties.

To counter these problems, project staff tried a number of different approaches. They included employers’ representatives on the steering committee. They held workshops for employers. They offered the bosses incentives, such as follow-up training for those who were hired. Informally, too, project staff asked friends and acquaintances for sympathetic employers and visited some bosses repeatedly.

One of the innovative tools that proved successful was the “job fair,” a 1-day event that brought employers and potential employees together. The first job fair, organized by the Government and three vocational training centers in December 2002, drew a lot of media attention and was attended by 500 people.

As a result, some 212 full-time jobs were offered by the private sector and government agencies. This initial success was qualified, however, when only 105 kept their jobs after a 2-month probation. The reasons for the high attrition rate lay on both sides. In some cases, the workers proved too handicapped for the job. In others, the lack of a suitable workplace infrastructure made it too difficult for them to work properly.

But the event—the first of four—“proved that perceptions can change when employers and the public are willing to provide the opportunities for people with disabilities to show their potential in the job market,” says Sodnompol Baigalmaa, ADB’s project coordinator at the time.
Beyond the capital, the project was implemented in five other provinces. A 3-hour journey to Darkhan City along one of the country’s few paved roads underscores the logistical difficulties of implementing projects here. These rolling green hills—interspersed by isolated gers and herds of horses and cattle—are blanketed in snow during the long winters when temperatures can fall to -40°.

At intervals along the route are ovoos, shrines made up of piles of stone where Mongolians commonly make offerings or walk around in a clockwise direction to ask the spirits for a safe journey. Mongolians believe strongly in the power of omens, good and bad, and Mrs. Gandhi had cited one example of a “bad attitude” that affects the disabled—the belief that if one gives money to someone, all of one’s luck will flow to that person.

With arrival at Darkhan, some 230 kilometers almost due north of Ulaanbaatar, comes the realization why it was so difficult to find jobs for the disabled here. This is an industrial city created by the Soviets in the middle of the steppes from the 1960s. With a slew of factories, many set up as joint ventures with formerly communist countries, such as Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, and row upon row of uniform apartment blocks, Darkhan soon became the country’s second largest city. But when the Soviet-backed enterprises buckled, and some 20,000 Russians went home, Darkhan was harder hit than most cities. Unemployment here rose to more than 40%.

“The private sector was the only niche for the disabled to survive,” says Bayarsaikhan Batsukh, head of the NGO for disabled persons in Darkhan province. To meet the challenge, the ADB project focused on encouraging the self-employed. It organized 1-month training courses for over 120 people who wanted to be beauticians, hairdressers, or masseuses. It also provided grants of up to 500,000 togrog ($425), though the average grant ranged between $200 and $500, and training to 55 would-be entrepreneurs to start small businesses or expand existing ones.

“We had budding entrepreneurs with ideas, but they mainly lacked capital and a workplace,” says Puntsag Mishig, who implemented the project in Darkhan and now works at the local employment center.

Entrepreneur Shirnen Shuura runs a profitable business in Darkhan City. Being partially blind does not deter her from making butter, yogurt, dried curd, and fermented mare’s milk.

“In this industrial city, the private sector was the only niche for the disabled to survive”
At a modest bungalow tucked away in an outer suburb, some former trainees have gathered to tell how they have fared since the project ended 2 years earlier.

The Sakura center, named after the Japanese cherry blossom tree that blooms in spring, is a neighborhood community center that is run by disabled people. A group of noisy, though well behaved, schoolboys descends upon the center to play pool. Watching over them is a woman who says she is the games room manager, adding matter-of-factly that she is mentally-impaired.

In one cubicle, a young man is giving a haircut to a client. Naidan Batkhuyag, who has been partially paralyzed since contracting polio at the age of 3, has been a hairdresser since taking the training course 3 years earlier. He and his wife, also a hairdresser, can each earn 30,000 togrog ($30) a day, he says. They have a child and a free room at the end of the bungalow in exchange for doubling as the center’s caretakers at night.

In another work area, a diminutive woman has to climb onto a bed to massage a client. Chuluunbat Nina, 25, trained as a hairdresser under the project, but found it too tiring to stand for long periods because of her disability—she was born with severely impaired ankles, knees, and hips and was unable to stand until she was 16.

“When I was young, I crawled around the house. I wanted to help out around the home, or to draw or paint. But whenever I tried to do anything, my family would tell me that I couldn’t do such things,” she says, her eyes moist. “They didn’t mean to hurt me, but they did. I realized in time that I would have to be strong if I wanted to do anything.”

Societal attitudes toward the disabled have been traumatizing, she says. Once, she was inside a church while a group of children were playing truant outside. She had nothing to do with the children, she says but, later, police and others attributed the children’s behavior to the influence of Ms. Nina, whom they called “crazy and stupid” because of her disability.

Ms. Nina could not go to regular school because she did not have a wheelchair. She learned to read and write through informal schooling. Now she is training as a masseuse and hopes to earn 1,500 togrog per session to supplement earnings as a freelance hairdresser. Although she is still unable to stand for long, she enjoys dancing and playing pool. She lives with her family at home. Her parents, she adds, ask her these days to help with the chores, and she is glad to do so.

In the city, some of the small businesses seeded by the project are still operating. “Success or failure depends very much on the person,” says Mr. Mishig.

One husband and wife team, Zorigt Zorigoohuyu and Myagmar Otgontuya, both in wheelchairs, are operating a games parlor. They also rent out cell phones on a per-call basis. It has been a trial-and-error process, they say. With a 400,000 togrog grant, they set up two businesses—baking cookies and renting out cell phones. After a while, however, they found it too hard going around delivering the cookies—and transferred that business to relatives. Operating a games parlor—they pay rent but own the games tables—means they can stay on the premises. They also play pool when business allows.

Down the road, Shirnen Shuura is partially blind but that does not stop her running a profitable business making milk products and selling them from a small shop on the premises. She gets her milk under contract with herders and produces butter, yoghurt, dried curd, and airag (fermented mare’s milk). She used her start-up capital to buy a milk processor and two freezers.

“We gave these entrepreneurs grants, but we made them sign contracts that required detailed financial reporting for a few quarters so that we could monitor progress and make sure they were on the right track,” says Sambuu Selenge, who helped to implement the business development program.

Overall, an ADB evaluation gave the project high marks, noting that it produced good outcomes, both within its 3-year scope and beyond.
Clockwise (from top left): Chuluunbat Nina is a hairdresser and masseuse; Jagar Baasanjav sings at weddings and concerts; teacher Myadag Chogjmaa (standing) with former pupil Bat Chuluundolgor; husband and wife Zorigt Zorigohuyu (left) and Myagmar Otgontuya operate a games parlor.
The project obtained jobs through vocational training for 2,308 people—though 400 lost these jobs within 3–6 months for a variety of reasons. In addition, the business development component created employment for 497 people after providing start-up capital to more than 200 individuals and 122 groups.

Although it fell short of its target of obtaining 4,000 jobs or income-earning opportunities, the project transferred a database of resumes to the Government’s Employment and Promotion and Social Welfare Office, so the effort to find work continues. In addition, a web site for disabled job seekers that was developed under the project is still being maintained.

Ensuring sustainability, the NGOs, especially the larger ones, are functioning well, though they freely admit that they require more capacity building.

Encouragingly, too, some of the more innovative aspects of the project have been replicated. A trade fair involving the disabled has been held by United States Agency for International Development, and local governments continue to organize job fairs.
“One way to change perceptions is to integrate the disabled into mainstream education from an early age”

Slowly, employers’ attitudes are improving, says Nambar Sodnomtseren, head of the Trade Union of Disabled Persons. “It’s still difficult, but less so than before.”

One way to change perceptions for the next generation is to integrate the disabled into the main education system from an early age. Another ADB-financed project is doing precisely that, building or improving schools for over 100,000 children, including 2,000 who are disabled. All these schools have a disabled-friendly environment and, in the rural areas, they have dormitories where children from nomadic families can board.

Summarizing the pilot project, Mrs. Gandhi says, “This was a pilot project with time-bound objectives and limited money. We couldn’t do everything, and the important outcome is that it serves as a good foundation. It shows the road ahead.”

If the destination will provide the disabled with broader social acceptance and a chance to rise above their physical limitations, it cannot come too soon for Ms. Nina and thousands like her.

Above:
Hairdresser Naidan Batkhunyag contracted polio at 3. He and his wife double as caretakers for a community center.

Opposite page:
Herders in Mongolia need to be self-reliant: So do the disabled as they learn skills to earn income and become independent.
RESTORING THE REEF
Two stretches of water reveal much of the story of Papua New Guinea’s declining coastal resources—and of the efforts by some communities to reverse the trend.

At one beach outside Kavieng, the main port of New Ireland, a group of men and women are treading carefully in the ankle-deep water, trying to avoid the razor-sharp edges of broken shells concealed among the sea grasses. If they are lucky, they might find some small shells and the peanut worms that feed on the grass. But the big prizes—sea cucumbers and trochus (sea snails whose thick shells are used for mother-of-pearl buttons)—are long gone, possibly forever.

Two hours away, on the other side of the mountain range that divides this 350-kilometer-long, narrow island province, it is a different scene. Half a dozen men, holding nets, wade into the sea. They are only 15 meters out, with the water lapping around their waists. Within seconds, they catch several mullet, slithering and shiny. Shouting with triumph, they return to the palm-fringed beach and start degutting and cooking the fish over a fire.

The difference between the two locations is that marine life is exhausted in one, while it is recovering in the other. On the beach by Kavieng, one resident complains, “This area has been totally overfished because it’s near town, very accessible, and there are no restrictions or management of the reef. The people who come here have no idea about the importance of managing these resources.”

By contrast, the village of Panakais on the west coast has stuck white poles into the water to demarcate an area that is closed to fishing. On this day, they are allowed to break the ban for a special occasion—there is to be a feast the next day to accompany a ceremony with a crucifix that has been brought to these islands from Rome.

The no-go zone is only one of several restrictions that the residents of Panakais, a tiny settlement of 300 people in thatched homes among coconut palms and gray sand, have imposed upon themselves as part of a management plan drawn up with the help of a local nongovernment organization (NGO). Other measures include a prohibition on poisoning fish with derris root or dynamite, fishing with fine mesh nets, or by torchlight at night.
This community-based management approach to conserving marine resources has been pioneered as part of a Coastal Fisheries Management and Development Project, financed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) with a US$5.7 million soft loan.

Seven communities in New Ireland—and another 17 in the province of Morobe—were implementing this approach by the time the project ended in 2007—and a further 37 were on a waiting list to participate in the scheme.

“Our project was to kick-start this concept and pilot it, and I’m happy that this has been achieved and we would like to see it replicated throughout the coast,” says Allan Lee, officer-in-charge at the ADB resident mission in Port Moresby.

“Some of our inshore resources have been overexploited, like beche-de-mer (dried sea cucumber) and others, so this program is very important and the approach is good,” says Sylvester Pokajam, acting Managing Director of the National Fisheries Authority (NFA), the semi-autonomous agency in Port Moresby tasked with managing the country’s fisheries on a sustainable and profitable basis.

In Papua New Guinea, as in other Pacific island nations, land is customarily owned by communities and, for coastal villages, this right extends to the sea in front of them. “This makes it important for coastal communities to take responsibility for their own resources,” notes Augustine Mohiba, NFA’s executive manager for fisheries management.

With a coastline of 17,000 kilometers and located in one of the most isolated parts of the world, Papua New Guinea has a wealth of fisheries, ranging from sea cucumber, trochus (shells) and reef fish in coastal waters to prawns, tuna, and other pelagics in deeper waters.

There is high demand for all these fisheries, but the sedentary ones are particularly vulnerable as they can be plucked from the sea bed. For tens of thousands of small-scale and subsistence fishers, the sea cucumber is a source of ready cash as they can be sold to traders to feed a huge and growing demand in the People’s Republic of China, where beche-de-mer is a delicacy. Similarly, trochus and mother-of-pearl shells are simple to gather and sell for export as decorative items and raw material for buttons.

As a result, however, both resources have become increasingly depleted. Reflecting this, exports of sea cucumber plunged to 400 metric tons in 2005 from a high of 700 metric tons in 1991.

Although more mobile, reef fish—such as groupers, trevallies, snappers, and emperors—are also under threat. One reason is that local fishing methods have become more efficient over the years.
“Underwater torches and spearguns make for easy catching of large fish at night”

“The problem is localized overfishing and a lot of this is the result of the impact of technology on traditional methods,” says Hugh Walton, a rangy New Zealander with Gillett, Preston and Associates, a consultancy which was engaged by the NFA to oversee implementation of the community-based management program.

“Gill nets, with fine mesh, have been around for only the past 20 or 30 years. Then they brought in underwater torches and suddenly you can go out at night with spearguns. This makes for very easy catching of large fish. You stun them with the light and spear them and off you go. Then we saw small boats with outboard motors come in. Just the technology of fishing has meant a lot more pressure on the reef,” says Mr. Walton, a former commercial fisher turned fisheries advisor.

Compounding the problem is that night divers often take out the big fish, which are the best breeders. “A mature grouper, which can live 35 years and sometimes much longer, are 50 or 60 times more fecund than a recently-mature 5-year-old grouper. You take out the big ones, male and female, and you essentially take away the spawning population,” says Mr. Walton.

Moreover, recovery is slower in the Pacific than elsewhere. “With tropical fisheries, we have huge species diversity, but the biomass is not vast and many species are slow-breeding,” says Mr. Walton.

All this translates into bad news for Papua New Guinea’s coral reefs, once among the most pristine in the world.

“The coral reef is like an oasis. It’s a self-contained ecosystem,” says Michael Schmid, a German marine biologist who was a guest lecturer at the National Fisheries College in Kavieng during 2007. “At one end, trochus consume algae, reducing its smothering effect on coral, while the sea cucumber acts as a filter, keeping the water clean by absorbing organic material from the seabed. You also upset the balance if you take out the big fish like the Maori wrasse, grouper, and red Emperor. In Papua New Guinea, the ecology has been stable for so long that when it becomes destabilized, it could be difficult to recover.”

A March 2007 report on sea cucumbers in New Ireland, carried out under the ADB-financed project for the NFA, found that numbers had dropped to 13% of 1992 levels, which had been alarmingly low even then. “The concern with sea cucumbers is that they need a certain density to reproduce, so some species may be depleted beyond a tipping point,” says Mr. Schmid.
As a remedial measure, the NFA has imposed a closed season on sea cucumber from 1 October to 15 January each year, but many think this is too little, too late. Brian Green, general manager of a fish processing plant in Kavieng, says the beche-de-mer situation is so dire that he has been pressing the NFA for a 2-year ban on harvesting them.

“They should recognize that if somebody who makes his living out of selling sea cucumber recommends a 2-year closure, it must be serious. But you have to do these things to make it sustainable,” he says.

The NFA is mulling calls for a 2–3 year closure, but has not, so far, made a decision. Ron Kuk, the authority’s executive manager for projects, notes there is a political aspect to the issue. “There are so many people who depend on selling sea cucumber to meet basic needs,” he says. Papua New Guineans are squeezed between a dearth of income-earning opportunities and having to pay for their children’s schooling and high prices for many imported essentials, including kerosene, clothes, radios, lamps, batteries, and canned food, which are often preferred over fresh fish.

Clearly, in the addition to NFA edicts, “there is a further need to involve the community in the overall management of the resources under their respective jurisdictions,” as the NFA states in a recent annual report.

However, carrying out a pilot community-based management program in a country like Papua New Guinea can present formidable obstacles. With some of the world’s most inhospitable terrain, including soaring mountains clad with near-impenetrable jungle, parts of Papua New Guinea remained unexplored long after Africa had unlocked its secrets.

So divisive is the topography that many of its tribes—the country has an estimated 800 languages—lived near each other for centuries without knowing of the other’s existence. Having
gained independence from Australia only in 1975, Papua New Guinea’s 5.2 million population has also had to make the transition from tribal to modern society at breakneck speed.

In New Ireland, home only decades ago to fearsome, cannibalistic warriors and one of the last areas to be settled, the community-based program has been implemented by Ailan Awareness, an NGO that has strong local roots.

Its founder, John Aini, is a down-to-earth man in his early 40s, who was born in New Hanover, just off New Ireland, and worked in Kavieng for 17 years as an NFA technician, carrying out fisheries stock assessments. He started his NGO with a few supporters in 1993 because, he says, “I saw a lot of destructive fishing practices in the villages and I didn’t think enough was being done on educating people about the damage they were causing to our resources.”

Then, as now, the challenge of raising people’s awareness takes on another edge when it involves traveling through the jungle or on the open seas to visit isolated communities.

A trip by banana boat, the common mode of transport, between Kavieng and New Hanover, for example, can vary between “4 hours if the weather is fine and longer if the sea is rough,” says Mr. Aini. With limited resources, he and his colleagues sometimes ran out of fuel—and food—and had to rely on passing boats for help.

A community-based management program typically starts with a “road show” and this can also be a challenge. Ailan Awareness members take a generator and projector onto the boat and, when they arrive at a village, hook up the equipment, string up a sheet between coconut trees, and project images on the sheet. If something goes wrong with the equipment, they have to rely even more heavily on other instructional tools like staging plays or role playing, handing out comics, or putting up posters.

A 2-hour field trip with Ailan Awareness from Kavieng to Panakais can be a small adventure. In a battered pickup truck, the first stage proceeds smoothly on a surfaced road built, remarkably, a century earlier by one of the first settlers, a determined German colonial officer named Franz Boluminsky, who somehow persuaded different tribes of headhunters to construct what became the finest road in the Pacific for several decades.
“Custom discourages men from fishing when their wives are menstruating or pregnant”

The next stage, a dirt track over the mountains, is trickier and, as the pickup truck struggles, Mr. Aini notes that this path turns into a quagmire during the rainy season and he has been stranded here, and sometimes during the night.

Bursts of rain also hold up this journey—the vehicle has to stop and seek shelter for the Ailan Awareness staff who are getting soaked in the exposed back of the vehicle. The only other people on the road are walking. Women carry poles across their shoulders, weighted by bundles of fruit and vegetables. Everyone smiles or waves in greeting.

In these parts, the influence of the spirit world is strong. The west coast is home to the “shark callers,” men who undergo purification rites before going to sea and, by chanting incantations and beating the water with a rattle, draw sharks to the surface where they are trapped or bludgeoned.

Around Panakais, parts of the jungle and sea are *masalai* (spirit) areas—off-limits for hunting and fishing. According to Malagan belief, the spirits might harm trespassers. Waters declared *tambu* or taboo by village chiefs often include those with strong and unpredictable currents or high-breaking waves with a rocky coastline.

Such traditions also act as a conservation measure, as can customs that discourage women from fishing during menstruation or men fishing while their wives are pregnant, says Robert Melki, an Ailan Awareness staffer who is from Panakais. “Some believe that if man goes away to fish or hunt while his wife is with child, the devil will follow him back, and turn his unborn child into a monster.”

In the past, small and stable populations hardly made conservation necessary, but destructive fishing practices and steadily growing populations have changed the picture.

A village elder, 70-year-old Marcos Nges, wearing a traditional necklace of white *mis* shells (often used as currency) and *laplap* (sarong), recalls the times when fish were plentiful.
“When I went fishing as a kid with my father, we would lower a meter-deep net into the water and pull it up almost full of fish, big ones like Maori wrasse and double-headed parrotfish,” he says “We would have enough to feed our family—with enough left over for other families as well.”

But over the years, he says, some of the bigger fish disappeared and it took longer and longer to get a sizeable catch.

Thus, much of what they heard when the NGO first arrived at Panakais 2 years ago struck a chord with villagers.

“They told us in a scientific way why we should not catch small fish and why we should leave the spawning fish alone,” says Francis Bolaf, a wiry man with a salt-and-pepper beard who is chairman of Panakais’ management committee.

“Some traditional methods are not always best,” says ADB staff member, Thomas Gloerfelt-Tarp, who helped design the project. As an example, he cites a local belief that when fish gather in groups around the time of a full moon, it is an opportune time to fish. “In fact, if there is an aggregation of fish, it usually means they are spawning and that is exactly the time when you shouldn’t be fishing. That’s why we need methods based on science,” says Mr. Gloerfelt-Tarp, a marine biologist.

Sitting on a log in the sand and chewing betel nut leaves, Mr. Bolaf says the community, in addition to restricting its fishing methods, has also agreed not to mine the coral reefs. Villagers like to grind coral into a white powder, which they use for flavoring mustard sticks. Now they buy coral powder from outside.

Helping villages, such as Panakais, develop a fisheries management program can require patience, says Mr. Aini.

“The important aspect is that villagers take ownership of the project. Our role is to facilitate and support but the program is conducted at the village’s pace,” he says. The initial road show, if the villagers are interested, is followed by several other meetings.

“At their request, we go back and talk to the leaders again, as well as youth groups and the older villagers,” says Mr. Aini. “We go to the schools, for the young are more adaptable and they are tomorrow’s leaders. But the young have not lived long enough to notice changes on the reef, whereas the older ones have. We also talk to men and women separately because they see the situation differently. The men will talk about not having enough fish or money. A woman will say there’s not enough fish to feed her children.”

Typically, a community elects a management committee that takes charge of appointing subgroups, discussing problem-tree solutions and, finally, drawing up a set of village laws. The launching of a community-based management plan is the climax of a process that can take several months.
Above: Walking is the common mode of transport on the west coast of New Ireland.

Right: Villagers wash fish in the sea before degutting them for a feast.
Afterwards, says Mr. Aini, follow-up work is needed, not only to make sure implementation is working but also to provide technical support for activities, such as replanting mangroves or mending fishing nets.

One of the trickier aspects of implementation is enforcing the village laws. An elder tells Mr. Aini that a villager was recently caught using derris root for fishing. The village court fined him 100 kina ($37). However, since the offender could not pay, he was made to clean the church grounds for 3 days.

Funding is a chronic constraint. “The people in Panakais requested training and equipment so they could fish beyond the reef. We did give one training session, but we couldn’t afford more training or equipment,” says Mr. Aini.

Similarly, the NGO helped the community install a fish-aggregating device to encourage fish—particularly the faster-growing pelagics a little offshore—to gather, making it easier for fishers to catch them. This worked well for several months, but there were no funds to replace it when it fell apart.

Despite such setbacks, villagers say that the conservation measures are working and that fish stocks are on the rise.

Sitting on a bench outside her home, Consetta Subul, a mother in her early 30s, says that as a child, she ate fish several times a week. “Then we caught fewer fish and we had it on the table only once a week. Now the fish are coming back, and we are eating it more often.”

Just as importantly, the community-managed program has boosted village morale.

“We had feuds because some families claimed ownership of the reef in front of their property and they would resent others fishing there,” says Mr. Bolaf. “Now we recognize that the reef is a communal facility, for which we have joint responsibility and from which we share the resources.”

So far, Ailan Awareness has facilitated three community-based management plans on the west coast of New Ireland, two on the Tigak islands, and two in southern New Hanover. Three others villages are ready to sign management agreements and 17 communities are “crying out to take part,” says Mr. Aini.

In Morobe, the second province covered under the ADB-supported project, there was no NGO in place to implement it, and Mr. Walton had to start from scratch.

“I hired people to do survey work, and I ended up with a core team of 4 guys in Lae who are absolutely passionate about what they doing and are really good at engaging communities,” he says.

Morobe is more spread out than New Ireland and its capital, Lae, is the country’s major port and industrial center. The core group formed a new NGO, Marine Resource and Conservation (Maremco) Foundation, that has 17 management plans in place in Morobe, with 20 communities on the waiting list, says Mr. Walton. “In one area, we have seven villages working together in one management plan—this is amazing in Papua New Guinea, where they like to sit and bung (talk) and are not that good at implementing.”

“Building on our Kavieng experience, we took our road show to 35,000 people in 4 months, village to village, and we had a huge impact,” says Mr. Walton.

One of the project’s most successful communication tools has been a series of comic books, printed in both the local language, Tok Pisin, and English and distributed to schools, communities, and local governments. The comics cover issues, such as reef management; closed seasons; sea safety; and one, called Nina Catches It, deals with HIV/AIDS, a significant threat to communities near major fishing ports. The comic tells the story of a woman who fishes all day without catching anything for her hungry son at home and, after encountering a purse seiner at anchor, agrees to exchange sexual favors for fish—and is infected with HIV/AIDS as a result.
A major reason that the community management campaign works well, says Mr. Walton, is that it appeals to the villagers’ concern for their children’s future.

“We talk to the older people, who always say that fishing used to be better. So we ask, ‘Grandpa, how do you want it to be for the kids and, of course, they say they want the kids to have the same rights and access they have,’ says Mr. Walton. “So we ask, ‘What are we going to do to turn that around?’ That’s the challenge we put back to them.”

Mr. Walton says the project yielded some lessons that could be applied in future. He regrets, for example, that the project did not conduct baseline surveys of community management areas to gather indicators of particular species and the health of the reef. “We’ve had tremendous feedback, with people saying, ‘It’s getting better,’ but it’s all anecdotal and it would have been better to have a more empirical study, based on transect indicators, so that we could measure the impact of our work,” he says.
Another drawback of the program is that, while it has focused on getting communities to cut back on their fishing, more needs to be done to give them something in return, such as alternative ways of earning income.

Villages like Panakais are fortunate to have soil fertile enough to earn money by cultivating a variety of crops ranging from copra, betel nuts, and mustard plants to taro, yams, bananas, and cucumbers. But many coastal villages, with poor soil containing a mix of broken coral and sand, cannot diversify so readily.

Mr. Walton concedes that, “We have an alternative livelihood component in the project, which would have benefited from more focus.” To support this, the NFA is implementing a cost-saving project in New Ireland to produce coconut oil as a fuel alternative. This has led to looking at other ways of saving energy costs, such as using solar light kits to reduce dependence on expensive kerosene.

The NFA has also been trying to promote aquaculture activities for several years, but development remains slow. Looking at livelihood activities with potential, the agency’s Mr. Mohiba cites growing seaweed in no-fishing zones as one example, and developing ornamental, or aquarium, fish as another, noting that these smaller fish reproduce much faster than the bigger fish.

Coastal communities are not the only cause of resource depletion. One major contributor to overfishing has been the “live reef fish” entrepreneurs, spurred by heavy demand in Asian countries. In these enterprises, reef fish are caught and kept alive in holding pens until a vessel collects and transports them, often to Hong Kong, China.

“For smallholder suppliers, prices received for fish are usually low, reflecting the risk carried by those moving live fish from these areas to Hong Kong, China and People’s Republic
of China. These low prices often result in overfishing to ensure greater returns,” notes the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research in a report.

In Kavieng, Mr. Green says, “One group was caught operating here without a license and their stock was put up for auction. I bought it and it was disgusting to see what they had—turtle shells, sea horses, under-size fish.”

Catches from inshore waters are 40% down from 5 years ago, reckons Mr. Green, who buys stock from local fishers straight off the wharf. As a result, local fishers have to go farther and farther away to earn a living. He attributes much of the blame on “live fish” trawlers that were allowed to fish these waters—and left it “like a desert.”

In February 2006, a large, black vessel appeared on the reef off the coastal village of Malai in Morobe province. It unloaded several small boats, each with a crew reportedly equipped with diving gear, cyanide spray bottles, and crowbars.

Incensed at this clear breach of NFA rules on live reef fishery, a party of Malai villagers went out in dories to confront the Hong Kong, China-registered vessel. They confiscated three of the small boats, as well as capsules that allegedly contained sodium cyanide—and handed them over to the authorities.

As a result of the incident, the NFA stopped issuing new licenses for “live fish” operators, but the vessel was allowed to leave Papua New Guinea waters with its haul. In a test case, a group of Malai islanders, helped by an NGO, the Centre for Environmental Law and Community Rights, is taking the case to court, suing for a breach of customary fishing grounds.

The episode underscores both a growing desire among coastal villages to protect their resources from outside poachers—as well as the frustrations of trying to implement the law in a land with weak capacity and governance among enforcement agencies.

New Ireland is another “hot spot” for illegal fishing, notes a report on the Impacts of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing on Developing Countries, prepared by the United Kingdom-based Marine Resources Assessment Group. It cites an NFA estimate that only 5% of illegal vessels are detected by fishery patrols.

“People in our communities are complaining of illegal entry by foreign fishing boats and poachers and really want to get their hands on them,” says Mr. Aini.

Apart from overfishing, pollution is another threat to fisheries, says marine biologist Mr. Schmid. He notes that Kavieng’s sewage goes straight into the sea, causing algae, for example, to grow rapidly and overwhelm the coral. Fertilizer from oil palm plantations and the run-off of top soil from poor logging practices are other activities that jeopardize marine resources.

Further down the road, he notes that mining companies have been awarded licenses to explore the seabed around New Ireland. “If you dig up the seabed, the environment is altered. No one really knows what will be impact on pelagic
fish,” he says. Climate change—and links between rising sea temperatures and coral bleaching—is another potential danger.

With the marine environment facing a multi-headed hydra, Mr. Aini confesses he sometimes feels overwhelmed. “Sometimes I think I am fighting a losing battle, but then the chairperson of one of our management areas at Tioputuk says he can see the dorsal fin of a Maori wrasse in the sea grass and someone else at Pananaru says the sea cucumbers have increased in size, and I feel better.”

“Our reviews of the project during implementation found the community-based management program to be working well,” says ADB’s Allan Lee. “We would like to see it put on a sustainable basis within the NFA and eventually supported by provincial fisheries departments. The NGOs should upgrade themselves and become more like the private sector, bidding for contracts from the provincial governments.”

Although the ADB-financed project ended in 2007, its work may continue. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has a wider program to formalize a policy framework for community-based management, and this project may include support for community-based management initiatives in other provinces, says the NFA’s Ron Kuk. “So there is demand. We see the value of community-based management.”

As more communities decide to make short-term sacrifices for long-term gains, conservation could make significant headway for, unlike forests, fish stocks can recover relatively quickly.

“The common fish stocks for usual consumption worldwide may be 20% of what they were, but if you had a complete ban on fishing for 3 or 4 years, they could recoup considerably, and it would make very good economic sense,” says ADB’s Mr. Gloerfelt-Tarp. “The oceans would be teeming again and, this time, you could use more appropriate fishing techniques to harvest them sustainably.”
CASH UP FRONT, PLEASE
Residents of Kitulgala in Sri Lanka’s Kegalle district have long boasted that this mountain village in the steamy jungle some 65 kilometers east of Colombo became famous as the main location for filming of the 1957 World War II movie classic, “The Bridge on the River Kwai.”

In the film’s climactic scene, a real train and a full-size bridge are blown up over the wide, sparkling Kelani River that runs by the village.

Sadly, however, tributaries of the river that pass through Kitulgala are polluted with waste from the village, while another of the village’s major water sources is contaminated by animal refuse.

But this crisis gave rise to another source of pride for the village. With help from a nongovernment organization (NGO) engaged by Sri Lanka’s National Water Supply and Drainage Board (national water board), villagers found a higher, purer water source—and built a supply system that includes a small dam, storage tanks, chlorinator, and 18-kilometer network of pipes.

As a result, Kitulgala’s 2,000-odd inhabitants, especially the women, have a convenient, reliable, and clean water system which, since they maintain and finance it, is also sustainable. Along the way, however, the village stumbled over seemingly insurmountable obstacles and almost missed its opportunity.

Kitulgala is among 150 villages covered in Kegalle district by the Third Water Supply and Sanitation Project, supported by a US$75 million soft loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Five other districts—Anuradhapura, Hambantota, Kalutara, Monaragala, and Puttalam—are included under the project.

In brief, the deal offered by ADB is this: The project—cofinanced by ADB and the governments of Sri Lanka, France, and Norway—offers to pay 80% toward improving a village’s water supply facilities—provided the community makes a 20% contribution before the first spade is turned. The contribution is generally a mix of cash and labor. Furthermore, once a water supply facility is completed, the community must assume full responsibility for its operation and maintenance, including financing.
Yet when the deal was first announced, it was regarded as unworkable by a skeptical national water board—and incomprehensible by rural communities used to having free water services.

Officials of the government agency pointed to earlier attempts at a participatory approach, which had not been successful in getting communities sufficiently involved in projects to ensure their sustainability.

There is deep irony in all this for Sri Lanka is, in fact, completing a large historical circle. The Sinhalese have long been master managers of water resources. The ruins of vast reservoirs—called tanks—in the former capital of Anuradhapura testify that they have practiced complex water management systems based on cooperation and self-help since the 4th century B.C. Even Sigiriya—the palace fortress built on a 370-meter-high rock in the 5th century A.D.—had baths and water gardens with an exceptionally engineered hydraulic inflow and outflow conveyance system based on trapping rainwater.

Such traditions appear to have been subsumed during successive colonial eras under the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British. At any rate, the current resurgence in community-based water management has its roots in the fiasco of the world’s first water decade in the 1980s, says Vagn Rehøj, a Danish consultant water sector planner who helped design—and evaluate—the ADB-financed project.

“Donors poured billions into water schemes all over the developing world—only to see most of them fall apart because of a lack of community ownership and involvement, which meant nobody was taking care of them,” says Mr. Rehøj.

The lesson of the wasted billions was clear: some way had to be found, not only to encourage communities to take more ownership of water projects, but to back up this commitment by contributing hard cash toward their construction and being responsible for their operation and maintenance.

Or, as A.H. Gunapala, chief sociologist of the national water board, explains the strategy behind the ADB-backed project:
“But nothing has happened. Why should we pay money?” the villagers asked

“We want communities to do more than just participate. We want them involved as partners, owners, decision makers, and managers.”

The key to this innovative approach is that it is demand-driven, which means improving water supply facilities only when villages request them—and agree to the terms of the deal.

Getting this message across to villagers, however, proved far from easy.

In Kitulgala, the project engaged an NGO, Dehiowita Janatha Sanvidanya (Dehiowita People’s Organization), to provide free environment and hygiene programs as a way of introducing themselves and winning the villagers’ trust. When the NGO followed this up by trying to explain the benefits of the ADB-financed project, however, it ran into a wall of bafflement.

“The villagers couldn’t understand why, on the one hand, the government was spending millions of rupees on this project and, on the other hand, was asking villagers to contribute,” says Mathota Somadasa, a benign, 68-year-old retired school principal who is secretary of Kitulgala’s water users’ association.

Under the deal, the village had to take several steps, including forming a water users’ association (a community-based organization or CBO), elect a committee, open a bank account, and collect and deposit contributions.

“When we went around trying to collect contributions, the villagers would say, ‘But nothing has happened. Why should we pay money?’” says P.G. Chandrapala, the CBO’s astute chairperson, 60, and former manager of a cooperative.

Kitulgala villagers had to raise over a million rupees (Rs) as its share of the Rs16.3 million project cost. But many residents would not, or could not, pay. Some were already using a water system provided by a local authority—which contained high levels of the bacteria E. coli and often did not operate during the dry season—and did not want to contribute toward
another system. Others were too poor to raise the average contribution of Rs5,000.

The deadline for depositing the contributions came—and passed.

“I gave them a 6-month extension and wrote several letters, saying we could not help them if they couldn’t raise the money,” recalls Rohan Wijesooriya, the water board’s mild-mannered district manager for Kegalle. “Frankly, they were so far behind that I wanted to drop the village from the project.”

Fortunately for the villagers, the newly elected CBO committee was persistent—and cunning.

“They wanted to see something, so we laid some pipes on the ground to pretend the project had started,” says Mr. Chandrapala, with a chuckle. The CBO also organized visits to villages that were already benefiting from the project, and that helped a great deal.

Bank loans were arranged for some who could not muster the ready cash. A Dutch NGO was persuaded to chip in Rs100,000 on behalf of the poorest villagers. Finally, after many delays, Kitulgala reached its target.

Construction of the project took about 18 months—the standard length of time stipulated under a contract between the water board and the CBO. The villagers, many of them farmers, worked on the project after being given training in basic skills, such as masonry and pipe-laying by the local NGO.

A plaque on the village’s main road proudly proclaims that the water project was commissioned in August 2004 amid fanfare and the presence of dignitaries, including a Government Minister.

Since then, the Kitulgala CBO, which had also been trained in financial management and technical maintenance by the NGO, has been managing the system by itself.

Mr. Wijesooriya, who was at the project opening, confesses this is his first visit to the village since then.
“We are always available for consultation or services like water testing, but Kitulgala has not approached us since their project started. A project like this empowers the community and reduces the burden on the government.”

In an aside, he adds, “Frankly, I am surprised at how well it is going and how beautiful it looks.”

Members of CBO management committees are unpaid, but critics note they can still misuse their position. To bolster transparency and accountability, CBOs are encouraged to hold regular meetings and a yearly election of officers. Mr. Wijesooriya says some CBOs don’t do this, but adds, “If the system is running smoothly, some communities do not feel the need to elect new members.”

CBO committees can engage staff, such as managers and caretakers, or people to carry out basic repairs. In Kitulgala, some grumble that the manager is the chairperson’s 19-year-old daughter—and that she gets a higher salary than the caretaker—but there is general contentment with the improved water service.

One mother of two, Darashika, 26, now has clean water on tap, as well as one of the 200-odd toilets provided under the project. “Everything is easier now,” she says, opening a tap in the yard of her home. “We used to get water from an unprotected well 150 meters away, and the children had stomach upsets. These days, my children don’t go to the clinic as often, and I use the time I save fetching water to sew clothes—which my husband sells in the market—and teach my children.”

Another mother, Iranganee, 38, watches her 6-year-old Melan take a shower at the back of her home. “We used to walk for 15 minutes every time we needed to bathe or collect water, three or four times a day,” she says. “My husband came with me most of the time.”

At the local primary school, Devika Panagoda, who has been teaching there for nearly 2 decades, says that, before the new water system started, children would more frequently stay home with diarrhea and other stomach ailments. Both school attendance—and enrollment—have jumped since the project began.

Villagers are willing to pay on a metered basis for the water they consume—they decide on the tariff rate, too—with the proceeds going toward operation and maintenance. By October 2007, the CBO had a healthy surplus of Rs430,000 to cover repairs and other contingencies.
“The villagers have learned that water has a value,” says one CBO member. “They know it used to be free, but they realize it costs money to ensure it’s clean and to bring it to the home.”

Kitulgala’s upstream source provides a gravity-fed water system, which is relatively easy and cheap to maintain. Many lower-lying or drier areas of Kegalle district are not so fortunate.

A case in point is Bisowela, a rice farming community scattered around the junction of two main roads, some 45 kilometers southwest of Kandy.

One of the major challenges of the ADB-financed project is developing new water sources. Much of Kegalle is in Sri Lanka’s “wet zone” and receives more than adequate rainfall. The problem lies in the groundwater, which has a high content of iron and manganese. “The longer a well is used, the more the water quality deteriorates and becomes harder,” notes Mr. Wijesooriya.

In Bisowela, the water board and the NGO, Tholangamuwa Human Development Centre, initially identified an existing well as the source for the community project. But the well was already being used by farmers for irrigation—and they protested strongly.

This kind of conflict between different water users is a common problem and, in Bisowela, it caused a split within the community. The water board proposed a compromise solution for the villagers to use the well only during harvest time, when it was not needed for irrigation, but the farmers stood firm. The dispute went to a public hearing where the farmers’ protest was upheld.

After lengthy delays, a new deep well was dug. Initially, residents complained of a strong taste of iron and two new filters were installed. The new facility, with pump house, storage, aeration and filter tanks, and pipes, has been operating since March 2006, piping water to some 750 people out of a population of about 2,000 people. Some residents, especially those living in outlying areas, opted for cheaper alternatives, such as dug wells or rainwater-harvesting tanks made of ferro-cement.

Despite relatively high running costs, which include electricity to pump the water from underground, the system is working well, says Lalitha Nanamearachi, who is secretary to the Bisowela CBO, as well as a CBO Forum that represents several smaller community organizations.

At a gathering of Bisowela water users, H. P. Pramadasa, a tall, white-haired traditional doctor, says the new water system, as well as the installation of several new toilets, has improved hygiene and reduced contamination levels.

One woman, Seetha Dasanayaka, echoes the sentiment of others when she says that before the new facility, she had to walk 1 kilometer to fetch water and had to ration the family’s drinking water.

The Bisowela CBO also shows a hefty balance in its bank book, which can be used to maintain not only the water system but other shared facilities, such as the temple or the community hall.
The main concern of Bisowela residents is the limited supply of its deep well. There is a waiting list of 200 people wanting piped water connections, including newcomers or those who did not sign up for the scheme earlier. They cannot join the current project because of supply constraints.

“What will happen when our well runs dry?” asks the doctor, waving his hand. “Will ADB or the Government help us with another well?”

But Mr. Wijesooriya says the current well “should be good for 50 or 60 years, although its water quality may become harder in time.”

The CBO is now independent, he adds, and if it wants a new water source, it will have to raise its own funds and engage a contractor. The same applies to other parts of the community that want new water supplies.

Overall in Kegalle district, the ADB-financed project has been completed in 150 villages. “Each village had its own problems, its own requests and complaints,” says Mr. Wijesooriya, who has been working in Kegalle for 7 years. “To start off, in some villages, 60% didn’t want to pay, but they were ultimately convinced of the benefits. We had to handle each village differently. You need listening skills; you need to respect their culture and traditions.”

NGOs were indispensable to the project in more ways than one. “Typically, we use one NGO for five villages. For two villages, we appoint one community facilitator and for three villages, one technical assistant. The NGO carries out activities ranging from initial awareness building through to construction, explains Mr. Wijesooriya. “The water board simply doesn’t have the staff to implement this project, so we need the NGOs, who also have the grassroots knowledge and the time and the patience.”

Despite all the headaches, the combined effort of the government, the NGOs, and the villages has been worth it, he says, noting that only two villages in his district did not participate in the project.

In the 150 villages that did take part, he says, “About 95% of CBOs manage their own facilities and rarely go to the NGOs or us for assistance. The other 5% of CBOs are not functioning well, mostly because they are not collecting money, so repairs are not done and the water system deteriorates.”

“To start off, 60% of villagers didn’t want to pay—but they were ultimately convinced of the benefits”
On the larger tapestry, sociologist Mr. Gunapala, says that in six districts, some 950 subprojects have been implemented.

As for coverage, the project exceeded its target by nearly 50%, notes W.B.G. Fernando, assistant general manager of the national water board and director for the ADB-financed project. “We aimed to reach 1 million people but, because other villages saw what was happening in the project villages, they wanted to join, too, and we ended up improving water supplies for 1.45 million people,” he says.

Completed at the end of 2007, only time will tell how sustainable the project is over the long term, but thus far it has earned high marks for achieving strong levels of community ownership. For example, the project significantly exceeded one key target, the 20% contribution of the community toward capital costs. The average contribution was 28%, partly because some villagers opted to contribute cash instead of labor.

“I’ve never seen a figure like this,” says Mr. Rehøj, who works for the Danish firm, COWI and has been involved in water projects in more than two dozen countries. “It reflects a strong
sense of ownership and that it is very demand-fed.” He
attributes much of the communities’ responsiveness to
Sri Lanka’s high rate of literacy.

As well as increasing villagers’ sense of empowerment and
dignity, a project completion report by Mr. Rehøj notes that,
although communities are contributing toward project costs,
their investments are often outweighed by economic benefits.
One benefit monitoring and evaluation study found that over
87% of respondents reported that their income had increased
during the project period, partly as a result of improved
access to water. The same study found that 57% of women
had increased their monthly income by using the time saved
collecting water for income-generating activities.

However, Mr. Rehøj also notes that one weakness of the project
is that it does not always reach the poorest of the poor, as
mandated by ADB’s development objectives.

“The biggest risk of the demand-driven approach is that it
reflects the demands of the rich and not the poor. Not every
household can pay the contribution, so the rich pay for the poor
and you create a situation of dependency,” he says.

Jennifer Francis, an ADB NGO/Civil Society Specialist who
used the project to pilot participatory assessment methodology,
agrees.

“By and large, the project did well in addressing the concerns
of the poor, especially women,” she says. “But in some
communities, they didn’t take the time to differentiate between
the better-off and the poor. They selected an area and assumed
it was homogeneous. Also, in some cases, the transfer of
technology could have been better handled.”

The issues of improved social mapping and skills transfer will
be addressed when the ADB undertakes its next water project
in Sri Lanka from 2008. This project will include areas in the
north, such as Vavuniya, that have been affected by the long-
running conflict between the Government and the Liberation
Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

By bringing communities together to solve common problems,
Mr. Fernando believes such water projects have the potential to
reduce conflict tensions.
Unquestionably, the conflict, by draining government resources, has slowed the pace of increasing water coverage, among other social development targets. A few years ago, Sri Lanka aimed to provide water coverage for the entire country by 2010. The current coverage is 75% and Mr. Fernando says the current Millennium Development Goals include bridging the gap by 50% by 2015 and 100% by 2025.

If coverage is behind schedule, the demand-driven approach is seen to be on track, with only minor modifications needed.

One of the project's important achievements is the changes it has brought about in the national water board in terms of attitude and policy.

“It bridged the gap between an engineering agency and rural folk, using NGOs as mediators,” says Mr. Rehøj.

“It was a huge challenge for us to understand how important it was to consult with communities,” acknowledges K.L.L. Premanath, head of the national water board and a former director of the ADB-financed projects. “It wasn’t easy, but we’ve changed 180º.”

As for the psychological impact the project has had among rural communities, one anecdote by Mr. Rehøj illustrates the point. “I talked to one school teacher with a CBO of a small town,” says Mr. Rehøj. “I asked him, ‘Can you really handle things like financial management and technical problems? Is this above your capability?’ The man replied, ‘There are some nights I am not sleeping, when I have doubts, but I am driven by the feeling of being independent.’”
REBUILDING BROKEN LIVES
After gaining independence in 1991, Tajikistan endured economic collapse, civil war, and widespread hunger. To help rural people back on their feet, ADB financed a pilot microcredit-based livelihood project for women and farmers. Implemented through two international NGOs, the Aga Khan Foundation and CARE International, the experiment encountered many challenges, but produced several positive outcomes.

The women’s group composes a peaceful scene, without a hint of the tumultuous circumstances that spawned it. In a drab building in Vahdat district in western Tajikistan, a dozen women, mostly young, are bent over a long table, their fingers busy with embroidery. Along a wall behind them, older women are stitching a floral-patterned kurpacha, the thick, multipurpose Tajik quilt.

Some of the girls are teenagers, who are only dimly aware of the horrors that followed Tajikistan’s unsought independence in 1991. But Zebo Oimatova, 52, a benevolent figure in traditional kurta (robe) and headscarf who is watching over the room like a mother hen, remembers it all—economic ruin, villages torn apart by civil war, the hardscrabble existence and, finally, a chance to rebuild shattered lives.

In 2002, Ms. Oimatova, a warm-hearted woman of simple sincerity, was elected chairperson of a women’s federation, a community-based organization created under a pilot Asian Development Bank (ADB)-financed project to provide microcredit for women to start small businesses and farmers to improve crops.

Despite being overawed—“I thought I could not manage the job because I am only average and not so well educated,” she confesses—Ms. Oimatova has seen her group grow from a handful to over 2,500 members and, importantly, become self-sufficient.

Like hundreds of other village organizations seeded by the ADB-financed project, this federation—called Bonuvoni Karasu—continues to provide small loans and training for a variety of income-generating activities though the project closed in 2004. Such community-based organizations provide cash and social cohesion in a still-fragile economy with high unemployment and widespread poverty.

Tajiks are proud of their rich cultural and historical heritage and, as the soaring national monument in the center of Dushanbe attests, believe they are the true heirs of the great Samanid empire of the 10th century that spanned much of Central Asia.

But modern history has not smiled upon the country and independence, usually a coming-of-age milestone, turned a stable life upside down for Ms. Oimatova, a primary schoolteacher married to a college instructor and a mother of seven—and most of her 7 million compatriots.
“Many families, including mine, were starving and we lived off boiled alfalfa soup and mulberries”

The severance of lifelines with Moscow, engine of the Soviet economic behemoth, saw the slowing down or closure of state-run industrial enterprises and collective farms in all the former republics. Jobs evaporated. Social services eroded.

In the political vacuum, civil war broke out between the Soviet-backed secular government and forces controlled by radical Islamists. The conflict claimed up to 50,000 lives in 1992. Hearing from neighbors in Karasu that young women were being abducted, Ms. Oimatova fled with her family, which included three daughters, to stay with a relative in the Rasht Valley. “We became refugees, leaving everything behind,” she recalls. Her husband went to the Kyrgyz Republic to try his luck as a trader.

Ms. Oimatova did return home, but the next decade was largely a hand-to-mouth existence based on the land. “We grew apples and strawberries and produced milk, which we sold or bartered for other items,” she says, her careworn face a chart of her experiences.

It was against this backdrop in 2002 that ADB launched the Tajikistan Rural Poverty Reduction Project, financed by a $3.2 million grant from the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction, which was set up to explore innovative ways of helping poor people.

With the Tajikistan Government as partner, ADB decided that a major part of the experiment would be to use nongovernment organizations (NGOs) to implement the project. This would encourage the development of civil society as Tajikistan made a wobbly transition from a command to a market economy.

In the event, ADB selected two international NGOs with markedly different backgrounds. The lead role was allocated to the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) which, besides contributing $300,000 to the project, had nearly a decade of experience in Tajikistan and a staff of 3,000 people on the ground. AKF is headed by the Aga Khan, the Paris-based spiritual leader of the Ismaeli Muslims, a moderate sect that promotes education and women’s rights.

The second NGO was CARE International, which was began as an American humanitarian agency after the World War II and is now an international confederation working in 66 countries with headquarters in Geneva. CARE opened its office in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe in 1994 and had a staff of 200 by 2002.
Each NGO had its own approach and this was welcomed by ADB. “There are many pathways out of poverty, and the whole idea was to try out different ways of ensuring sustainable rural livelihood through community participation,” says Lourdes Adriano, an ADB Senior Rural Development Economist who administered the project in its later stages. “The NGOs were given flexibility in implementing the project innovatively.”

It was the first time the Tajikistan Government had worked with NGOs in an ADB-supported project, as well as the first time the NGOs were partnering ADB. It was to prove, as they say, a “learning experience” for all parties. In the context of development effectiveness, the relationships, especially those between the Government and the NGOs, were to be almost as important as the impact of their work.

AKF had arrived on a humanitarian mission in 1993 to relieve famine-like conditions in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, the large and sparsely populated eastern province made up almost entirely of the Pamir mountains. The Pamiri tribes who dwell beneath snow-capped peaks and glaciers are ethnically distinct and most are Ismaeli Muslims. They generally live in extremely simple conditions.

Kishwar Abdulishoev, general manager of AKF’s Mountain Societies Development Support Program, was one of many from Gorno-Badakhshan who had been studying in Dushanbe and returned home after conflict broke out. He has good reason to recall the food shortages.

“During the war, the roads from Osh (in the Kyrgyz Republic) and Dushanbe were blocked by opposing troops, so nothing could come into our villages. Many families, including mine, were starving and we lived for months off boiled alfalfa (animal fodder) soup and dried tut (mulberries),” he says.

In a joint effort with the Government and the international donor community, AKF brought in food by trucks from Osh and distributed it around the province. AKF also initiated agriculture programs that it would later build upon in the ADB-supported project. It helped the Government transfer state farmlands, with rights of tenure, to village families for private cultivation. AKF also brought in new wheat varieties and inputs, such as fertilizer, which helped increase local food production.

After the Government of Tajikistan signed a peace agreement with the United Opposition in 1997, it asked AKF to extend
its operations to the Rasht Valley. This was the base of the opposition and it was hoped that development would also strengthen peace-building.

A cornerstone of AKF’s approach is its village organization program, which it had implemented elsewhere, including in northern Pakistan. AKF brought it to Tajikistan in 1998.

“We had seen an institutional gap at village level because the chain of government had broken down. Formal organizations like village committees and farmers’ associations were not working as they had no support from the oblast, district, and subdistrict authorities,” says Mr. Abdulalishoev. “So we encouraged villages to set up their own organizations, elect leaders, arrange their own funds, and plan and implement activities. We contributed funds to help the poorest of the poor.” Interestingly, Mr. Abdulalishoev was also a village leader under this program, later obtaining a masters degree in Pakistan under an AKF scholarship and joining the foundation’s Mountain Societies Development Support Program 7 years ago.

However, the AKF approach proved sensitive, especially with a government long used to a top-down approach.

“There had been no civil society, so when you said ‘nongovernment,’ some thought you meant ‘against the government.’ It was even perceived that we were establishing a parallel government—and so did some of our donors—as we were setting up village organizations as grassroots-level partners for implementation of development projects,” says Mr. Abdulalishoev.

“We supported the villagers to make decisions for the development of their village. It was all very new for the government, but slowly they saw that we were contributing to peace-building and economic development and they supported us.”

AKF intended to pilot test the village organization model in 14 villages in Gorno-Badakhshan, but demand was so great that they ended up covering 90% of the province’s rural communities within 2 years. In 2000, AKF took the bottom-up approach to the Rasht Valley and, 2 years later, to Khatlon province. By mid-2004, it had introduced the program in 817 villages in 18 districts across three major regions.

Some villages did not wait for AKF to arrive. In the Rasht Valley village of Zarkamari 3, people heard about the program from other villages and wrote to AKF, asking to be included, says Zarif Sharipov, a burly accountant-cum-farmer, who was subsequently elected head of the village association.
That was in 2003, when AKF was implementing the ADB-financed project. It was not long before Zarkamari 3’s new village organization raised funds—more than half comes from monthly contributions of 20 dirams (US 6 cents) from the community’s 1,200 inhabitants—and began implementing projects. Two of the more important ones included building a bridge over a river where two children had drowned during floods and constructing a piped water system to bring drinking water from a mountain stream 2 kilometers away.

Mr. Sharipov says he cannot support his wife and five children on the meager salary he earns as an accountant at a nearby chicken farm but, since he learned how to use better seeds and other inputs under AKF training, his wheat and potato harvests rose by 25% and 35%, respectively, in 2004 and have gone up steadily each year since.

Under the ADB-financed project, AKF also set up women’s microcredit groups for buy-and-sell activities and here, too, they encountered resistance, especially in districts where religious leaders played a more dominant role after the secular Soviet era. Some men said they did not want women to be involved in trade.

That said, one result of economic collapse that had a massive impact on women was the departure of a large proportion of able-bodied men to the Russian Federation and elsewhere in search of work.

The hillside village of Elok, a sprawling Rasht Valley settlement that winds along paths lined with poplar trees, is typical in this respect. “Half our men aged between 20 and 40 are away,” says the leader for one part of the village, Rasul Tuhtanazarov, a kindly, white-haired former schoolteacher. The men departed after losing jobs at the nearby hydropower station at Rogun or at a nearby state livestock farm, he says.

Mr. Tuhtanazarov, who also worked on construction sites in the Russian Federation for 2 years before rheumatism kept him home, says that many migrant men come home only once a year and some never return.

In such circumstances, it is not surprising that some women, with more responsibility and no spouse to share it with, welcomed an opportunity to get out of the home, start a small enterprise and share experiences with others.
In Elok, that chance came in February 2003, when AKF outlined a microfinance proposal under the ADB-financed project. Seventy women signed up, a number that soon grew to 100.

The scheme was simple. By forming groups, women could borrow small amounts of money for 6 months, at an interest rate of 3.5% a month, from a revolving fund seeded by the ADB-financed project. The interest rate was relatively high, but no collateral was required. Although members could pursue individual enterprises, repayment was a group responsibility.

In a tiny room, members of one women’s group crowd around excitedly to recount their experiences to a visitor. One group of nine borrowed a total of 3,120 somoni ($890) for a variety of activities, says Anzara Sufieva, the group leader. Ms. Sufieva bought 20 chickens with her loan, made money by selling eggs, and ended up with 40 chickens after repaying her share of the loan. Another woman bought a sheep and bred lambs from existing stock, while a third opened a small shop.

Asked who was the most daring entrepreneur, members turn around as a small, pert woman stands up. Qumri Sulaymonova says she borrowed 350 somoni, took a public bus to Dushanbe—an hour’s ride away—and bought socks, hats, women’s articles, and children’s clothes from the public market. After selling her products in Elok, she made 10% profit—and thereafter made the trip every 2 weeks. She soon made enough money to afford to take taxis instead of buses, she adds with a smile.
She repaid her loan, and took out another. Recently, both she and her husband have taken out loans of several thousand somoni, both from the village organization and a microfinance bank, to finance the building of a new home and a livestock enterprise. Ms. Sulaymonova is stepping up the business ladder.

“This project has had a big impact on the village and women have become empowered,” says the gentlemanly Mr. Tuhtanazarov. He pauses. Then, amid laughter from the women, he says, “They are even starting family planning now. They are free.”

At AKF’s headquarters in Dushanbe, Mr. Abdulalishoev says, “In one district, the men told our field staff, ‘We don’t want our women to be involved in trade (microcredit projects). They should be staying at home.’ They even put physical pressure on the field staff.”

Mr. Abdulalishoev also recalls that some of the men who had originally opposed the microcredit project for women ended up changing their minds. “One stood up at a meeting and thanked our field specialists, saying, ‘I was wrong. My wife now takes care of the children’s education and she buys the clothes, and I am glad I don’t have to worry about these things any more.’” Mr. Abdulalishoev adds that AKF had hoped that 25% of the women in target villages would take part in economic life—in fact, more than 30% did so.

Under the ADB-financed project, the NGOs split up the territory, with AKF working in the Rasht Valley and CARE implementing the project in four districts in the west.

CARE, has a tradition of focusing on women and the poorest and most vulnerable of community members. Interestingly, this simple-sounding goal proved one of CARE’s biggest difficulties,
“Everything was top-down, everything was dictated. People didn’t organize on their own”

says Louis Alexander, a 20-year agency veteran who has been country director in Tajikistan since 2005. “There is an assumption that as soon as you work with the community-based organization, you reach the poor. Not true. You reach those who know how to negotiate, how to talk,” he says.

Illustrating the point is the experience of Ms. Oimatova in Karasu. As she discovered, the obstacles she encountered were not within herself, but with her husband and religious leaders in the community. With her husband, who complained that her new responsibilities kept her from home, the solution was a mix of sweet talk and stubbornness (in fact, the problem disappeared after he was appointed district head and realized he could ill-afford to expose himself to criticism from female constituents).

With the religious leaders, the problem was more subtle. There were those who opposed women’s groups because they believed the woman’s place is in the home, but there were others who used their principles as bargaining chips.

Ms. Oimatova says she tried to be diplomatic. “I put on my headscarf and went to talk to them. Sometimes, they agreed to my wishes but asked if their wives could also have access to credit and seeds, even though they were not poor.”

“This is exactly what I am talking about,” interjects Mr. Alexander. “There is hierarchy at every level and in the village you also have the wealthier elements who know how to take advantage of their position. Sometimes, you have to give and take. Identifying the vulnerable and marginalized is a very big challenge for all community-based work.”

Even when the poorest are identified, adds another CARE officer, they are often handicapped from borrowing as they lack land and resources. Moreover, they are more likely than others to resist taking out a loan for fear they won’t be able to repay it.

This did not stop CARE from trying to reach the poorest, however, and an interesting statistic reflects this. Whereas AKF’s microcredit loans were almost 100% repaid under the ADB-financed project, CARE’s repayment rate was 87%, partly because they provided loans to poorer clients.

CARE also had its share of adjustment problems with the Government during implementation. Curiously, there were differences over training.

The NGO focused on improving incomes through agricultural training to improve crops in both kitchen gardens, largely the domain of women, and the so-called “dehkan farms,” larger plots mostly worked by men.
Training, however, was not a concept easily understood by local government officials working alongside the NGO. “The project’s advisory board wanted to allocate more funds to buy and distribute seeds and fertilizer and to rehabilitate irrigation systems rather than for training,” says Mukhiddin Nurmatov, who worked for CARE on the ADB-financed project from the start and was acting manager toward the end. “But it was clear that villagers immediately wanted to join community-based groups once they understood how to solve problems with training.”

In fact, training in new crop technologies was essential for both the community-based organizations and the Government’s agriculture department staff, especially after the departure of Soviet agriculture experts. It was one of the sad ironies of Tajikistan that, although more than 70% of the population lived in the rural areas, they knew very little about farming. Partly, this was because during the Soviet era, most agricultural land—and only 7% of the country is arable, anyway—was devoted to state production of cotton, the major agricultural export.

Moreover, 7 decades of centralized rule had an effect on people’s ability to think for themselves. Though the Russians brought many advances to Tajikistan—including good infrastructure and universal health care and education—“Everything was top-down, everything dictated, and everything done for people, so they didn’t organize on their own,” says one country analyst.

To help women get the most out their gardens and from raising livestock, CARE contributed to the formation of 360 women’s groups and 20 Federation of Women’s groups, comprising a total of more than 6,600 women.

Many, like Ms. Oimatova’s “Bonuvoni Karasu” federation, have grown not only in size, from a few dozen to some 2,000 members, but also in their range of activities. Ms. Oimatova points to photographs on a notice board that show how the group has diversified from kitchen gardens and micro-enterprises to awareness-raising events on health and nutrition issues to cooking and pottery classes.

To be sure, the risks of extending credit for agriculture are far higher than for, say, small businesses, as a visit to dehkan farmers in the village of Guliston, Vahdat district, confirms.

Akbarali Abdulloev is an ox of a man who was elected chairperson of the Guliston farmers’ association, one of the first community-based organizations set up with CARE’s support in 2003.
However, Mr. Abdulloev reports that, of the association’s 18 farmers’ groups that borrowed from a revolving fund seeded by ADB in the early days, only eight groups managed to repay their loans. According to the rules of the game, if an individual defaults on a loan, the group tries to bail him out. If a group defaults, it is disqualified from further credit.

In 2003, the first year of borrowing, there was a good harvest. But, says Mr. Abdulloev, the following year produced a string of defaults as a result of heavy floods and a disease that affected wheat production. He says one of the reasons his own group of 18 farmers survived is that it was one of the first to receive credit that year and they were able to plant early and avoid much of the later destruction.

Before the ADB-financed project, Mr. Abdulloev was growing only wheat, but training, as well as credit, enabled him to expand into cash crops, such as safflower, potato, cabbage, carrots, tomatoes, and onions, and also to increase his small stock of cows and sheep.

With a grin of satisfaction, he says that, of his six children, five are now at university. “I have 5 hectares and I produce harvests and I spend it all on the education of my children,” he says.

In all, CARE helped to establish about 500 farmers’ groups and half of them are still operating 3 years after the ADB-supported project came to an end, says Mr. Alexander. “That’s pretty good when you look at what farmers have to deal with. They have drought or flooding, lousy seeds, little or no support from the Government, no investment, no access to new land, and many have only an hour or two of electricity a day.”

In the early days, one important aspect of the farmers’ groups was that they brought people together from disparate groups, even from opposing sides in the civil war, says Mr. Nurmatov.

“You would find in the villages supporters of several parties, who wouldn’t greet each other in the streets. But after they were organized into groups, helping each other with seeds or management issues, they became friends,” he says. “Our people are multi-ethnic and this project helped to bring them together.” Indeed, Mr. Alexander says that “just staying together and working on a variety of activities” is the real benefit of such a group, despite mishaps they encounter on the way.

In an ADB-financed completion report, the pilot scored highly in terms of outcomes, despite difficulties in implementation. The partnership between ADB and the NGOs worked well, after an initial period in which the NGOs had to adjust to ADB’s procedures in matters, such as procurement and disbursement. However, the relationship between the Government and NGOs was fraught with conflict over the life of the project, and this also caused much delay. “But this was also a breaking of the ice and, because of this experience, there was a better understanding that there was a regulatory and supervisory role for the Government, and the Government also learned what NGOs could and could not provide,” says ADB’s Ms. Adriano.
Farming, not doctoring, gave me the income to raise a family of 10 children

The report noted that the international NGOs “did a very good job in project management—fiduciary, monitoring and evaluation, day-to-day implementation and problem solving.”

“There has been an increasing acceptance of NGOs since the collapse of the Soviet Union,” says Jennifer Francis, an NGO/Civil Society Specialist with ADB. “However, deeply-rooted perceptions are difficult to change overnight and certain NGOs continue to be perceived as political opponents and suffer interference with their activities.”

Although the role of international NGOs has declined in recent years, the reason may be to give more scope to a growing number of local NGOs, she adds. “The Government wants to engage better with NGOs on a more professional basis and is requiring them to re-register so they can better regulate them, as well as making funds available to them.”

Crucially, the project was rated “highly efficient” in terms of its many positive outcomes. Many families did escape from poverty in the five project districts and many more women became involved in the village economy. Their small businesses also brought social benefits by increasing the availability of local goods.

In terms of sustainability, the project was assessed as “most likely.” The credit activities of the NGOs were transferred to formal microfinance institutions established by the NGOs—AKF’s First Microfinance Bank and HUMO, which evolved from CARE’s microcredit unit. Today, they are among the country’s five largest microfinance institutions which, in total, reported a portfolio of $14 million by the end of 2006.

The lasting legacy of the ADB-financed project could lie with the hundreds of community-based organizations it helped to create and which function today. An encounter with a retired doctor, Mir Pirov, 72, and his wife, Toira, 73, an ex-nurse, in the countryside underscores how important such groups can be to ordinary Tajiks, even as life becomes almost surreal.

In virtually every other country, a doctor is a highly-valued member of the community and remunerated accordingly. During Soviet times, says Dr. Pirov, “I earned 200 roubles a month, and my pockets were full. Since 1991, my income dropped and my last salary before I retired was 7 somoni a month, or nothing.”

Farming, not doctoring, provided the livelihood that has enabled him and his wife to raise 10 children. Dr. Pirov never took out a loan, but says he did receive training from a CARE program that made a big difference.

“I used to grow only wheat on my 1 hectare lot. Then I learned a new variety of crops—potatoes, carrots, garlic, onions, beet, and turnips. As well as growing five or six crops, I am getting two harvests a year instead of one and the yields are better,” he says. He earns between 4,000 and 5,000 somoni a year from selling wheat and vegetables.

At their home, his wife brings out an array of food and drink for unexpected visitors. Such hospitality has been the same at every meeting with people at their homes or their workplace. Tajiks are renowned for the warmth of their welcome. They even have a saying: “A visitor is a gift from God.”

They have been hit hard in their pockets, but most preserve their values and dignity intact.
FIGHTING FOR THE FOREST
In a wooden hut on stilts, squatting on a bamboo-slatted floor, 27-year-old Grieng Liec is stabbing the air to punctuate his story. A slight figure with straight, black hair falling over one eye, Mr. Liec is recounting how a village protection team confronted some illegal loggers during a patrol the day before.

In the Song Thanh forest, a part of Viet Nam’s Central Annamites—which has been a nature reserve since 2000—they came across eight illegal loggers using portable saws to chop trees into logs. Though some of the village team fled, Mr. Liec and another patrol member stepped forward, brandishing knives. The loggers fled, dropping one of their saws. Carrying the saw, Mr. Liec had reached the edge of the woods when the loggers came after him to retrieve their cutting tool. They threw a crude, homemade petrol bomb at Mr. Liec. It missed, exploding with a dull plop nearby. After an angry exchange, and interventions from other locals passing by, Mr. Liec reluctantly handed back the saw and was allowed to walk away.

Mr. Liec, from the village of Vinh in the outer reaches of Song Thanh forest, is a Ka Tu, one of many ethnic groups dwelling in the magnificent Annamite Mountain range that stretches like a 1,100-kilometer spine from north to south, straddling both western Viet Nam and the eastern edge of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

The Annamites are home to a few dozen ethnic minorities, with many living in the mountain forests and lush foothills of Quang Nam province. The diverse clans have their own languages, customs, and dress of intricately-woven indigo blue—but their distinctive way of life is increasingly under siege.

Their particular concern is that a forest that for generations has provided their sustenance—and has been a source of shelter, medicine, and spiritual succor—is being rapidly depleted by outsiders. Despite a ban on hunting and logging, outsiders from the lowlands continue to swarm into the woods, carrying away logs and wildlife in trucks or on the back of motorbikes. They sell the fruits of their labors to traders or entrepreneurs. The animals they ensnare end up on dinner tables in local restaurants or are exported as deer antlers or monkey bones for medicinal purposes. The interlopers care not a wit about the sustainability of their destructive and illegal practices.

The ADB and the World Wide Fund for Nature are partners in a conservation project in Viet Nam’s Central Annamites to save one of mainland Southeast Asia’s most diverse rainforests.

They are helping largely ethnic communities improve their livelihoods and fight off illegal loggers and poachers. The partners face an array of environmental threats brought on by development activities, such as the construction of roads and dams, as well as gold mining.

Opposite page: A house and plot of farmland in Song Thanh Nature Reserve: Indigenous ethnic groups are cultivating home crops rather than practicing swidden agriculture.
Mr. Liec asks, “What would have happened if I had been wounded? Who would have paid for the hospital bill?” It is a pertinent question as Mr. Liec, who shares a threadbare dwelling with his wife, Coor Tuonh, and their 6-year-old daughter, clearly has limited resources. He sits under a naked lightbulb dangling from the thatched ceiling, the only electricity-operated device in their simple home.

A forest ranger listening to Mr. Liec is sympathetic, but shrugs. “We’re also attacked and sometimes injured in our work,” says Le Cong Be, vice-director of Song Thanh Nature Reserve. Improvements to the road—which is also a second economic corridor to the Lao PDR, some 70 kilometers away—has made access easier for those engaged in illegal activities, he adds. A compact man, Mr. Be says he became a ranger to join the civil service, but now loves his work in the wilderness.

Mr. Liec is not alone in risking danger to defend his land. In nearby Pa Rong, a community of only 28 households, Coor Tong, the 27-year-old village head and member of the local protection team, says their young people go out on patrol at dawn to look for loggers and at night for hunters. Sitting cross-legged in the village meeting hall, colorfully painted with snakes and tigers, Mr. Tong says simply, “If our young were to leave the village, the forest would die.”

“The Ka Tu people feel passionately about their land and are prepared to fight for it. They are very brave,” says Luong Quang Hung, coordinator of a World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) pilot project for community-based, sustainable forest management in Quang Nam. The project is financed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) under a broader Biodiversity Corridors Conservation Initiative (BCI) spanning the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS).

Village protection teams, which have been trained by the local Forest Protection Department with support from WWF, can monitor and report on illegal activities, but have no enforcement power. Their work is voluntary and unpaid. Reflecting on his experiences, Mr. Liec asks, “What would have happened if I had been wounded? Who would have paid for the hospital bill?” It is a pertinent question as Mr. Liec, who shares a threadbare dwelling with his wife, Coor Tuonh, and their 6-year-old daughter, clearly has limited resources. He sits under a naked lightbulb dangling from the thatched ceiling, the only electricity-operated device in their simple home.

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Forest rangers from the Quang Nam Forest Protection Department (FPD) are the next line of forest defense above the community-based village protection teams. Rangers have the power of arrest, but are severely understaffed.
Standing by a balcony at the rangers’ administrative building, Tran Van Thu, who has worked in Song Thanh since it was made a reserve and has been director since 2004, gestures at the mist-shrouded, dark green hills outside, a fraction of one of the largest evergreen forest reserves in the Annamites. “We have to look after over 90,000 hectares, but we have only 27 rangers—and that includes me,” he says, with a wry smile. “We need 90 rangers—one per 1,000 hectares—to do an adequate job.”

Under a WWF program, some rangers in Quang Nam received training in law enforcement through the Bangkok office of Wildlife Alliance, an international nonprofit conservation and wildlife protection organization. Staff shortage is one reason why the rangers made only 87 arrests in 2006. One WWF official notes that, given the volume of illegal activities in the forest, they could have made that number of arrests every day.

Forest protection is only part of WWF’s innovative Management of Strategic Areas for Integrated Conservation (MOSAIC) project, says Barney Long, who helped start up, and headed, the project in Quang Nam province in 2002.

For a conservationist, the Central Annamites is a treasure trove. As a result of remaining wet for thousands of years, its evergreen rainforests harbor many unique species of flora and fauna. Among the better known animals found exclusively in this region are the antelope-like saola, the Annamite rabbit, and a monkey called the grey-shanked douc. In 2007, WWF reported that 11 new species of animals and plants had been discovered in the Annamites, including two butterflies, a snake, five orchids, and three other plants. One WWF technical officer, based in the city of Hue, said the discoveries could be “just the tip of the iceberg.”

Funding has been provided by the United States Agency for International Development, the MacArthur Foundation, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. “We started with a lot of small projects, trying to tie everything done in
a village into a process with the provincial government that could be replicated,” says Mr. Long. “We worked with over 30 government departments on issues ranging from community matters to law enforcement and education. We built up trust and processes and we developed good relationships with communities and the government.”

An important step in furthering community-based forest management was to secure land tenure for local people. In Viet Nam, land is owned by the State, and it was important to obtain legal access and harvesting rights for local communities so they could protect the forest products from outsiders.

“One of the first things we did was to sit down and talk to the villagers about their traditional ways of managing the land and the threats they perceived to their system,” says Mr. Long, a 31-year-old Briton. “It was complex work because Quang Nam province has seven ethnic groups and each has a different way of managing the forest. The Ka Tu, for example, live off the forest and have a communal approach to managing it, whereas the Kinh, who have a money-based economy and exploit forest products for sale, are family-based. To complicate matters, some communes, or groups of villages, are 50% Ka Tu and 50% Kinh.”

Under a project on forest land allocation, funded by the Ford Foundation, WWF worked closely with the Quang Nam Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DONRE), which issues land-use certificates. One of the major challenges, however, was getting Vietnamese officials to understand why communities needed to be consulted on such matters.

“In a top-down government, the attitude is, ‘Why talk to the community? We are the government, we are giving them land, we will tell them what they have,’” recalls Mr. Long. “We had to persuade officials that getting communities involved is the key to sustainable forest management.”

If understanding the new approach was challenging, implementation was very difficult, says Duong Chi Cong, DONRE’s provincial director. In Viet Nam, western-style civil society organizations are at a fledgling stage—in fact, they were banned until a few years ago—and the process of village consultations in this area was undertaken by the government agency.

“Our staff lacks manpower and capacity. They don’t know English or the minority languages. The roads in the mountains can be very bad, so communications were challenging,” says Mr. Cong, beaming hospitably in his office at coastal Tam Ky, capital of Quang Nam province.

Another problem was legal, as there are differences between the land law and the forest law, he adds. Nonetheless, after
a protracted period, the agency agreed, in principle, to issue land-use certificates, also known as Red Books, to seven pilot communes in which WWF and its provincial partners work, as well as some 30 other communes.

It has taken a long time to make headway on the issue of land tenure and, as a result, livelihood activities are only just starting in Song Thanh.

WWF would like to see villagers involved in projects that are both profitable and enrich the forest, such as growing native hardwoods, rattan, and bamboo. In Pa Rong, for example, the World Conservation Union-IUCN, a WWF partner, took villagers to rattan plantations and provided each family with 1,000 rattan sharpenings. The rattan was planted only recently, says Mr. Tong, the village head, and it is too early to calculate what economic benefits the new crops will bring.

Meanwhile, in early 2006, ADB, a long-time promoter of integration among the six countries of the GMS, launched a major cross-border environmental initiative.

BCI aims, in partnership with governments and nongovernment organizations (NGOs), to connect fragmented forest ecosystems in nine subregional landscapes, including the Central Annamites. At the same time, BCI seeks ways of increasing cash and non-cash benefits for poor households in remote mountain areas. “This means that while ecological diversity is paramount at landscape level, we want to see local communities earn from small-scale homestead forestry as an important part of diverse restoration models,” says Javed Mir, ADB’s Bangkok-based Principal Natural Resources Management Specialist.

BCI sought NGO partners with conservation skills and grassroots knowledge and, in WWF’s activities in Quang Nam and Quang Tri, it found a ready-made program that matched its objectives. For WWF, the infusion of $4 million from BCI was also timely as MOSAIC’s funding from other sources was running out.

BCI’s strategy in Viet Nam fits the Government’s program to increase forest cover by up to 40% of total land cover by 2010. Statistics show that the country is reversing its decline in forest cover, though experts note that much of the new cover consists of plantations with limited biodiversity value. To be sure, the Government does not want to see its remaining forests go the same way as the Mekong Delta. Only a century ago, the Vietnamese Mekong Delta was an interrupted mosaic of wetlands and forests. Today, the region has been converted almost entirely to rice farming and other uses.
A core aim of BCI is to assist poor communities in remote mountain areas where traditional ways of life have already been seriously eroded. "Slash-and-burn agriculture and hunting, the two foundations of Ka Tu culture and spiritual life, are basically illegal now," says anthropologist Nikolas Arhem, who has been working with his father among ethnic minorities in Viet Nam. "Food security and nutritional status are probably decreasing as a result of the destruction of natural resources."

Indeed, life has become harder with the ban on hunting since Song Thanh became a nature reserve, says Arat Co, a doughty, 67-year-old Ka Tu woman who has lived almost all her life in Vinh. The only period Ms. Co left the village was during the United States military intervention in the country when she worked in a jungle encampment where she met and married her husband, Arat O, a former Viet Cong soldier.

Taking a break from feeding chickens in the yard, Ms. Co says it takes longer to find food these days to supplement their tiny pension. Not long ago, she would catch fish easily with a big net in a nearby river. But the water has turned brown because of gold mining activities and the fish are less plentiful. Though they raise livestock, her husband, O, says he used to hunt with a bow and arrow animals, such as munjac (small deer) and wild pigs. Now they catch rats and rabbits in traps set up to protect their crops.

Despite their difficulties, Ms. Co says she is glad about the hunting ban because it means there fewer lowland hunters in the forest. The indigenous practice of swidden (slash and burn) agriculture did not inflict much long-term damage to the forest—until the growth of local populations made it less sustainable. Today, the Ka Tu still practice a form of swidden agriculture—in Pa Rong, for example, cassava, corn, beans, and rice are among the more common crops—but plots are limited and, without being allowed to lie fallow, become depleted over time.

ADB and WWF seek to generate income for forest communities through different ways. "We are keen to involve the local population in site mapping, demarcating areas for community forests, counting species, and setting up nurseries in return for wages," says ADB's Mr. Mir.

The partners also want to enable local people to grow homestead plantations or community forests for fuel and construction, as well as cash crops, such as fruit trees and mushrooms. To facilitate such activities, ADB wants to establish commune development funds with revolving funds managed by the communes.

The agencies and others share concern over major threats to the forest posed by other aspects of development.

Anthropologist Mr. Arhem says "one of the biggest catalysts of change in the area" is the famous Ho Chi Minh Trail—the major supply line for North Vietnamese troops during the conflict with the United States—which is now a highway, bringing increasing numbers of Kinh to the uplands on a long-term basis. The highway is a double-edged sword, he notes, for while it brings teachers, doctors, and nurses, it also brings shops and restaurants and small settlements.

"Prostitution, crime, and drug abuse are on the increase although are still not major problems as the highway hasn’t attracted much traffic so far," says Mr. Arhem. "If massive amounts of traffic start to come this way, however, the effect would be catastrophic."

Apart from the Ho Chi Minh highway, there is a military road that runs through the forest to the Lao border. This is a little used “army road,” but WWF notes that all roads bisect the forest, driving wildlife into ever smaller pockets that cannot sustain them.

Around the Ho Chi Minh trail farther north, in neighboring Quang Tri province, large tracts of the Central Annamites are still recovering from damage wreaked by Agent Orange and other toxic defoliants dropped by the US military during the
armed conflict in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Freshwater ecosystems still bear signs of toxins, while people and animals continue to face danger from unexploded ordnance.

In Quang Nam, the planned use of the Annamites’ many rivers for hydropower projects is another issue that is sounding alarm bells. The wet season offers a graphic reminder of the forest’s crucial role as a watershed as torrential rain frequently causes floods and landslides.

The flooding of rice farms in Quang Nam’s lowlands is an annual event, and drought is another regular and unwelcome visitor.

Under the Quang Nam Power Development Plan, approved in 2006, several hydropower projects are being built and more than 40 are in the pipeline, including four in Song Thanh. The Vu Gia–Thu Bon river basin, which includes the nature reserve, has the potential to supply 5% of Viet Nam’s current power requirement. Power generation is critical for national economic development, but demand is growing at 15% a year while little generation capacity has been added during the last 15 years.

If the hydropower dams are multipurpose, they could regulate water supply and mitigate the effect of floods and droughts. But the current plans are focused only on supplying the country with more electricity through the national grid. A recently published ADB strategic environmental assessment report on the impact of hydropower projects notes that, “If the hydropower facilities are managed only for power generation, there is the possibility of reduced dry season flows and increased flooding in the wet season.”
As well as biodiversity, parts of the Annamites are also abundant with gold—another magnet drawing outsiders to this hinterland. Informal gold mining camps have been set up in the forest, with communities of 500 people or more. Although rice is brought into the camps, many in camp live off the forest’s resources. In addition, gold mining is turning rivers brown with spillings that include mercury and cyanide. Increased sedimentation levels change river ecosystems and affect the fish, an important source of protein for upland communities.

Disturbingly for conservationists, gold mining interests have caused a sizeable chunk of the southern part of Song Thanh to lose its protected status recently. Reportedly, the area has been allocated to a gold mining company that was awarded an exploration and development license before Song Thanh was made a nature reserve.

“We resisted the move,” says Song Thanh director Thu, with a resigned expression. “But what can we do? We don’t have enough influence.” Against such a formidable array of threats, is there any realistic hope among those working to save Song Thanh?

As far as illegal activity is concerned, today’s situation, though a matter of concern, is not as bad as it was before 2000 when “people were free to come and go, there were no barriers, and the only constraint was the poor condition of the roads,” says vice-director Mr. Be.

“We had also only 16 rangers then and now we have 27 and they are better trained than before,” he adds.

Director Thu says a management plan for 2005–2010, financed and developed with WWF assistance, is now in place and should help strengthen enforcement. He notes that some rangers spend much of their time in the communes, developing close ties with locals. On the other hand, rangers earn a low salary of 600,000 dong ($37) a month, and Mr. Thu concedes that some might be tempted to supplement this by turning a blind eye to illegal activities.

One promising trend, he insists, is that illegal logging is on the decline. In the early days, barriers on the road to the forest were highly effective in curbing the timber traffic. However, the barriers had to come down after 2004 when national policies were changed.

Some forestry officials suggest that illegal hunting might be on the decline, too, but WWF is sceptical about this claim.

Wild meat is a delicacy in Viet Nam, and WWF reckons that 80–90% of hunting is fed by the demands of restaurants of Tam Ky, Da Nang, and other nearby cities. A Forest Protection Department survey funded and facilitated by WWF once counted 74 restaurants that served wildlife in Quang Nam province, though only a handful offer it exclusively.
WWF financed a publicity campaign, as well as training for rangers that included sending them to restaurants and signing agreements with owners pledging not to serve wildlife. “It was easy for most restaurants to take wild meat off the menu because it wasn’t a big part of their business,” recalls WWF’s Mr. Long. “The campaign worked fantastically for 6 months and I didn’t see a menu with wildlife on it for over a year.” However, once the 6-month, WWF-funded program ceased, the rangers stopped their restaurant checkups and wild meat consumption is on the rise again.

“It all becomes a little frustrating when you get these kinds of issues,” says Mr. Long. “It’s much easier to check the restaurants and remove the demand than to stop hunters over 5,000 square kilometers of forest.”

Such simple solutions are rare in dealing with the complex issues facing Viet Nam’s forests. The top levels of the Vietnamese Government also need assistance with “valuing ecosystem services, such as the forest’s ability to absorb carbons or sustain water supply for its rivers,” says Hasan Moinuddin, an ADB staff consultant who is BCI’s task leader. “They might not divert water from one river to another if they understood the cost of water shortages downstream. They might think twice about putting in a lot of hydropower dams if there might be a change in rainfall patterns and most of the lands will be dry.”

To be sure, the Vietnamese Government has partners with complementary experience in ADB and WWF. ADB has close ties with GMS governments and financial resources, while WWF has conservation experience at the macro- and grassroots levels.

However, achieving a balance between what is best for the forest and what is best for forest communities is no easy task and there have been bumps along the way. Both BCI and WWF agree that the most effective forest corridors should consist mostly of native trees, though some exotics can be included around homesteads.
One difference in approach, says ADB’s Mr. Mir, is that conservation is the primary goal for WWF, whereas conservation is a means to an end for BCI. “For BCI, it’s equally, if not more, important to have local people earning income and learning new skills while restoring the forest using species suitable for conservation, as well as serving livelihood needs,” he says. “For homesteads, we don’t rule out the use of naturalized exotics, such as acacia that give benefits—cash and products—in eight to 10 years. Native species are central to conservation, but can be harvested only after 40 or 50 years and don’t meet short-term needs.”

WWF also wants communities to increase their earnings, but through diverse restoration models that provide a wide range of livelihood options while supporting native species forest restoration and enrichment.

Mr. Mir is confident that an understanding in the best interests of conservation and local communities will prevail. To be sure, the forests of Viet Nam—and, indeed, the Mekong region—can only benefit from effective partnerships among local, national, and international actors working to promote Viet Nam’s sustainable development.

Above:
Arat O now traps rats and rabbits instead of hunting deer and wild pig.

Opposite page:
Coor Tong, head of Pa Rong village (right) and Le Cong Be, vice-director of Song Thanh Nature Reserve, in traditional meetinghouse.
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