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Patron-Client Relationship: Its Significance in Networking and Participation in the Philippine Rural Economy

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Abstract

The complexity of the social network in the rural societies in the Philippines greatly affects participation in rural development programs. The acceptance and rejection as well as the success and failures of any project intervention are determined largely by the level and extent of participation of the beneficiaries and target groups. Based on this proposition, the pursuit of participation for the sake of project sustainability has been a significant theme in rural development for the last three decades. Participation becomes a normal expression of development institutions and attempts to establish a sustainable development project through it are apparent in countless development efforts.

Up to the present, very few segments of the social system where participation plays a significant role have been empirically investigated. However, experiences in development work in different regions invariably show the existence of a dynamic social mechanism of exchange and reciprocal networks, which is inspired by the social, political and economic environment of which the project intervention is a subsystem. This prevalent social mechanism is an established pattern of social relationship commonly known as patronage, clientelism or patron-client relationship.

Patron-client relationship occurs (a) between actors with unequal status and power who are dependent with each other, b) there are resources valued by each actor, c) there are opportunities allowing exchange to take place, d) terms of payment of obligations are informal and unconditional, and e) there is an exchange network where the actors are connected by a broker.

The domination of power in the allocation of resources from the national to regional to local government or non-government institutions has given patron-client relations a new perspective. It does not only emphasize local patrons as landlords but also include minor professionals, bureaucrats and shopkeepers or teachers, lawyers, politicians and union leaders. These new patrons are called "alternative patrons or new brokers". They are not expected to provide the clients' needs as the landlords do, but rather serve as intermediaries who can make proper connections. As brokers or intermediaries, they are specialists in bringing the more and less powerful people into contact.

In rural development, the contact between the project implementing agents and the target groups is a determining factor of project success. The lesser the contact, the weaker is the participation by the target group. With the new role of the patrons as brokers or intermediaries, contacts and networks are made easier. Networking further enhances participation by the target groups in project activities.

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