

## Editorial Introduction

*Regional Development Studies (RDS)* is an annual journal, now in its eighth year of publication, of the United Nations Centre for Regional Development (UNCRD). The journal functions as a forum to present and discuss various issues and problems of regional development in developing and transitional economies with a particular emphasis on the planning dimension of regional development. To this end, papers are solicited from scholars and practitioners, worldwide, who wish to place their research before a wider audience. These refereed papers are published in combination with in-house research work resulting from ongoing UNCRD research activities. In-house submissions are also subject to external referee review. The current *RDS*, Volume 8 (2002) contains seven articles, two of which are wholly or partly the work of current UNCRD staff, while a third article is the work of a former UNCRD researcher.

As with previous issues of *RDS*, although the range of topics embraced by these articles is immense and the geographic coverage is similarly vast, an overarching theme of planning for regional development can be readily discerned in most. The articles arrange themselves according to the descending levels of spatial configuration covered – from macro regional (the case of Southern Africa) to subnational regional level (a case study on river flooding in India), and include two other articles from Africa (Ethiopia and Zimbabwe) as well as additional Asian contributions from Bangladesh, China, and Sri Lanka.

The opening article is by Blessings Chinsinga who gives his study of South Africa's role in the development of Southern Africa, the intriguing title "A Beacon of Hope in a Regional Context: The Case of South Africa". Tracing the often stormy history of modern South Africa's relations with its neighbours, the analysis is placed firmly within the ongoing process of globalization and seeks to show the potential gains for the entire region if and when South Africa becomes fully integrated into the region's development process. The article charts the progress of various regional alignments in recent history, specifically the Southern African Coordination Conference (SADCC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and identifies the reasons for success or failure while noting the high hopes once entertained for regional progress when South Africa finally became a democratic nation. With the massive economic dominance of the nation well-defined, Chinsinga advocates, in the short to medium term, a 'hub and spoke' relationship in the subregion between South Africa and its surrounding countries and argues that strategic integration into the global economy is an imperative. "In collaboration with the rest of the SADC member states, its (South Africa's) research institutions could facilitate the delayed... exodus to a skills- and knowledge-based economy, hence making it a beacon of hope for the subregion." The article concludes on a positive note with the author's view that South African-led revival efforts at the regional level could presage an economic revival which could spread through the rest of Africa.

Tgegne Gebre-Egzabher and Asfaw Kumssa focus on the recent decentralization moves in Ethiopia, in the second article of this *RDS*. Entitled "Institutional Setting for Local-Level Development Planning in Ethiopia: An Assessment and a

Way Forward”, they present a national-level analysis of the country’s decentralization reform plan, launched in 1991, and identify institutional deficiencies in local-level planning in Ethiopia, concluding that the institutional environment in the country is not yet conducive to such planning. The authors note the importance of the ongoing democratization process and its link with effective institution-building observing that “Democratization requires a strong civil society through which people can freely participate in the process of nation-building and the establishment of participation and accountable institutions.” Despite some progress towards meaningful decentralization, the record is still unsatisfactory, say the authors, and with relevant case examples call for genuine decentralization to the *woreda* (local) level rather than merely to regional mid-level administrative structures. Among the chief concerns they list requiring resolution is that government should be committed to decentralizing power, authorities, functions and resources to the *woreda* level.

The third article from Africa is by Chika Kitajima and is a timely study of the AIDS/HIV pandemic in Zimbabwe. Focusing on the child victims of this scourge, the article is entitled “Orphan Care Initiatives in Zimbabwe: Responses to the HIV/AIDS Pandemic” and documents the enormous problems faced by the country in dealing with the increasing numbers of children who have lost one or both parents in this way — projected to reach 910,000 by 2005 according to one estimate. Various policies are examined together with the various institutions and organizations which are implementing them, ranging from the central government, to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the church, community-based organizations (CBOs), and the local communities themselves. But, as the author observes, despite various legislation, government intervention “...and the multisectoral efforts of different actors, gaps still exist in the current support framework to fully cater for the needs of orphaned children in Zimbabwe”. On her list of concluding recommendations, she includes both the need to set up more effective monitoring mechanisms to collect and periodically update information on orphans and other vulnerable children for better planning as well as the need to provide donor education in the light of community-based initiatives, so that assistance can be provided in a more sustainable and flexible manner.

The next four articles are all from Asia, and begin with a detailed study from Bangladesh of the well-known Grameen Bank and its less well-known offshoot organization, the Grameen Kishi Foundation (GKF) entitled “Grass-roots Agrarian Problems in Bangladesh and the Modus Operandi of the Grameen Bank and the Grameen Krishi Foundation: Focus on the Landless and Functionally Landless Poor”. Authored by M. Ashraf Hossain, the study gives a broad picture of the current state of rural agrarian development in the country and looks at ways in which the poorest segments of the rural population (called the ‘landless and functionally landless’, LL and FLL, by Hossain) may best be assisted by GKF programmes. Having outlined the Grameen Bank’s considerable contribution to agricultural development in Bangladesh, the article then makes an assessment of impacts and progress noting that most benefits of credit, production inputs, and agricultural innovations were monopolized by “...wealthier farmers to the relative exclusion of small peasantry, tenants, and LL and FLL poor”. The reader is informed that the problems of these latter groups are currently being addressed by the Grameen Bank and the GKF. The recent policy strategies of the GKF, initiated in the mid-1990s, are examined along with the financial balance sheet, particularly those measures aimed at improving financial

stability, diversifying activities, and strengthening sustainability. The author feels, among other things, that the GKF's new innovations have great potential but that a process to reduce losses should be supported by "...more pragmatic planning, appropriate selection of technology, and diversification of business activities through continuous review and follow-up measures".

The focus of the next article remains at the grass roots, but presents a radical contrast to agrarian development in Bangladesh, being a study of community development in urban areas of China. John F. Jones and Qingwen Xu, in their article "Grass-roots Organization and Community Development: Evaluating the Chinese Urban Neighbourhood Committee note the difficult task, faced by any neighbourhood organization in China, of resolving the "...potential conflict between political duty and community democratic needs". Tracing the history of the urban neighbourhood committee (UNC) back to the years immediately following liberation, the authors outline the gradual change in social safety net (welfare) provision, previously the exclusive preserve of the government and work units, as issues of work, retirement, and elderly care are now increasingly being addressed at the local level. Despite being described as a "self-regulated, self-educated, and self-served residents' organization" under Chinese law, the authors note that the "...UNC is far from being a liberal western-style grass-roots organization, pressuring government agencies to be more accessible and more responsive to residents." Through a detailed case study of seven such UNC's in Beijing, the full range of duties and responsibilities of these committees is examined together with their composition, status, funding, and the perceptions of the residents themselves. The question is posed as to whether the UNC's, in their current form, can offer the sort of community welfare services for which they are responsible. Jones and Xu offer suggestions as to possible solutions and conclude that the UNC "has become an indigenous organization with the potential for further autonomy".

Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and their long-term impacts on the rural economy, within the context of Sri Lanka, is the topic next addressed. In a historical study, Widanage Rupananda and Joseph Mensah examine the 1970s implementation of a SAP and its effect on the rural agricultural economy with reference to a case study of Monaragala district in the south of the country. Having introduced the general characteristics of SAPs, the authors examine the background factors in the Sri Lankan economy which led to the need for a SAP, and the direct effects of the programme's implementation, specifically, the removal of import restrictions, removal of foreign exchange restrictions, unification of foreign exchange rates, and the strengthening of the free market mechanism. They list the positive and negative aspects on the agricultural sector in general before turning to the case of Monaragala district. They note a wide range of favourable impacts throughout the district's agricultural sector stemming from SAP implementation but also note considerable inequality in terms of those groups reaping the benefits. They found that most small-scale farmers in the study area face various social and economic problems "...including poverty, indebtedness, and a lack of information on improved methods of farming and financing" and recommend that policymakers pay special attention to the needs of these farmers "...by promoting income-generating activities among low-income groups in both rural and urban communities throughout the country".

The seventh and final article of this issue of RDS concerns disaster management, specifically flood prevention, and focuses on the Kosi River in North Bihar,

northern India, one of the most flood-prone rivers in the country. "Coping with the Kosi Floods: The Case of CD Block Salkhua in North Bihar, India" by Shashi Shekhar suggests ways of minimizing the adverse impacts of repeated flooding while maximizing the positive aspects. The Kosi River, due to its frequent and devastating flooding, is known as the 'Sorrow of Bihar'. Originating in the Himalayas, the river winds across northern India, frequently changing course, and wreaking havoc among the communities along the riverbank which depend on the sediment-enriched soils for their agricultural livelihoods. The author provides analysis of current flood management strategies at the regional level before exclusively focusing on the case study area, although he notes succinctly that "Flooding is a phenomenon which cannot be managed at the local level." The availability of timely and accurate information, including forecasts and warnings, is vital for any flood management strategy, and the various means of providing this are amply described as is the need for a multidisciplinary approach rather than a purely engineering one. Also discussed are flood mapping and damage assessment, floodplain zoning, and flood proofing. Among his major recommendations, the author concludes that restructuring the cropping pattern will greatly reduce flood damage; alternative modes of transport should be encouraged during flooding; credit and insurance facilities should be strengthened; and alternative sources of income should be located through promoting secondary and tertiary sectors. He also stresses the importance addressing the pressing problems facing the poorer sections of society while integrating issues of environmental degradation and ecology with economic development policies. The author maintains that the ideas outlined could equally apply to any flood-affected area.

Taken together these seven articles present an extremely wide range of information, ideas, and views which, on the whole, convey encouraging signs for the regional development scholar or practitioner. Whether in the policy arena or in the planning domain, progress and improved performance can be detected in each case. If readers' understanding of the issues involved has been heightened, or even some measure of interest stimulated, then the journal has achieved its purpose.