



Centre on Integrated Rural
Development for Asia and the
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BANGLADESH

The second celebration of

WORLD RURAL DEVELOPMENT DAY 2026 (July 6)

SPECIAL EDITION OF CIRDAP

Redefining Community Leadership
in “New Rural”: Integrating Comilla
and the Saemaul Undong Frameworks

THEME 2026

“Toward Vibrant,
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Rural Communities”

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Redefining Community Leadership in “New Rural”: Integrating Comilla and the Saemaul Undong Frameworks

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Abstract:*In the era of New Rural, marked by diversification of economic activities, growth of the non-farm and service sectors, and improved physical and digital connectivity, new challenges related to the digital divide, climate-related vulnerabilities, and rising inequality in rural Bangladesh require an innovative model of rural development. The article examines the evolving pattern of community leadership over time and its contextual role by analysing two recognized models of rural development, namely the Comilla model (CM) of Bangladesh and the Saemaul Undong (SU) model of South Korea. Evolved concurrently, the CM successfully drove economic transformation by modernizing and increasing productivity in the agricultural sector. In contrast, the SU began instilling an ideological base through practices of diligence, self-help, and cooperation, which led to the development of a culture of hard work and improved work ethic. Subsequently, it led to economic transformation by adopting new behaviours and technologies in different sectors of the economy. The learning of the two models suggests that the institutional framework of the CM and the social movement framework of the SU, based on its principles and complemented by performance-based support, remain valid for evolving community movements led by local leadership. The article proposes leveraging digital hubs, climate-resilient cooperatives and focusing on climate-resilient infrastructure by reengineering the existing model of CM with a positive mindset of SU. To address inclusiveness, skill training can be provided to members of resource-poor households on repairing solar panels and household appliances, producing green manure-vermicompost and tricho-compost, and improving supply chain efficiency by reducing waste. The leadership can address women in development by modernizing the daily lives of women through technological and social innovation. The new community leadership is expected to be innovative, proactive, and progressive in its mindset toward digital and climate-resilient technologies and persuade community members to adjust to the changed environment.*

1. Introduction

Inclusive and Sustainable Rural Development requires transforming the rural economy by adapting modern technologies and fostering a proactive mindset among people, while respecting existing social values and practices, and ecological balance is pertinent. This transformation requires policy support at the macro level and engagement of community members at the micro level. However, community engagement rarely happens automatically; experiences from earlier efforts show that initiatives that failed to engage the rural community suffered from flawed project design. Cultivating a culture of engagement among local people requires persuasion by a trusted, self-driven local leader with genuine concern for and dedication to the community.

By synthesizing lessons from the development efforts in Bangladesh in the 1950s, the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) developed the Comilla Model (CM) under the dynamic leadership of Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan. This highly integrated and participatory approach addressed the development of physical, administrative, and institutional infrastructure in the sixties. Concurrently, in the early seventies, South Korea also initiated a rural development model, namely the Saemaul Undong (SU), commonly called the New Village Movement, to minimize the growing disparity between rural and urban areas and to integrate central-level and community initiatives successfully. Both models aim to engage the rural community by developing rural leadership to achieve development goals. SU eventually developed a base for development that was transmitted to the industrial revolution by developing efficiency and competitiveness.

Today, rural Bangladesh has shifted from subsistence agriculture to a diversified economy characterized by entrepreneurship, a service sector, and a shifting land-centric power structure, to a web network. Increased connectivity, access to microfinance and remittance earnings, and women's involvement in the formal labour market of garments industry have driven this change. Despite these

achievements, rural areas face challenges related to the digital divide, climatic shocks, rising inequality, supply chain waste, unemployment among educated youth, and inadequate value addition initiatives.

To address these challenges, the economy requires a new development model that prioritizes inclusive growth by leveraging digital, green, and climate-resilient technologies. However, rural communities vary widely in respect of geographical vulnerability, socioeconomic status, social capital, expectations, and behaviour. Engaging communities and building their capacity to address the diverse needs of each area are prerequisites for conceptualizing a new model. Past experiences may enlighten how to engage rural communities by fostering community leadership. Based on a desk review of both the CM and SU, the article seeks to contextualize the evolving role of community leadership and strategies for engaging them by integrating experiences from the CM and SU.

2. New Rural: Shifting Social and Economic Context

New Rural is defined by a shift from a rural social and economic context centered on an Agri based economy and production to a diversified rural economy with a web of complex societal relationships. According to Rahman (2023), the traditional divide between urban and rural realities is diminishing, giving rise to an "emerging new rural." The characteristics of New Rural are as follows:

- **Diversified Economy:** Traditional agriculture is transformed through high-yield varieties, fisheries, livestock, and non-farm entrepreneurship, along with infiltration of urban lifestyle services: restaurants, beauty Parlors, and tailors, a booming service sector.
- **Improved Connectivity:** The physical and telecommunications infrastructure has changed significantly. Opportunities have emerged for optimizing input use, improving efficiency of resource use, reducing operational costs, and strengthening market linkages through integrating digitized technology.
- **New Societal relation:** Ahmed (n.d.) highlights that rural areas have evolved into a "new society" which is not isolated centres of underdevelopment, rather, rural urban continuum is the reality. Rahman (2023) found that the land-centric power structure is already diminishing, and a network-based power structure is rising. The communication and access to financial services and other services have changed production-based relation.
- **Institutional Gap:** Despite the proliferation of informal village organizations, there is a lack of effective village organizations to address the comprehensive needs of the new rural areas. The village cooperatives that evolved under the CM now suffer from a lack of innovation due to overreliance on the state and failure to develop competitive capacity to adjust in new reality (Ullah, Rahman, and Patwari, 2003). On the other hand, microfinance is often criticized for charging high service charges and for increasing the risk of debt traps. It requires a vibrant formal organization at the village level, having functional relationships with different service delivery organizations, both public and private. FAO (2014) recommended farmers' organizations with strong, member-elected leadership and robust accountability mechanisms, capable of remaining resilient in a globalized economy.
- **Challenges of New Rural:** Small farmers, who constitute 80 percent of farms, face barriers related to soil depletion, climate variability, affordable finance, and market risks. They require the adoption of modern technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), Geographical Information Systems (GIS), and e-commerce platforms, to achieve fair prices and support good agricultural practices with value addition across the agricultural subsector. However, introducing these technologies is often hindered by institutional barriers (Mujeri, M. K. 2018). Moreover, expanding the agency power of women to balance the reproductive and productive roles requires institutional innovations. The existing institutional structure and strategies need to be reengineered by utilizing lessons learned at home and abroad to contextualize in the current economy.

3. Pillar of Comilla and Saemaul Model

The CM was nurtured and developed in the social laboratory areas of the BARD. With a view to solving the structural problems of poverty and insecurity in rural society, the model seeks to address root causes such as an inappropriate administrative structure, a lack of physical infrastructure, dependence on

money lenders for accessing credit, high levels of seasonal unemployment among labourers from December to May, and limited access to technology and inputs for small farmers. Four mutually exclusive yet integrated components were developed through a series of experiments, namely the Rural Works Programme (RWP), the Thana Irrigation Programme (TIP), the Thana Training and Development Centre (TTDC), and the Two-Tier Cooperative (TCCA).

The Rural Works Programme emphasized the identification of physical infrastructure needs, i.e., a flood-control dam, an earthen road, and an irrigation channel, by the Union Council, the lowest level of local government. It mobilized community members to sell their labour in exchange for wheat. It successfully developed an infrastructure that facilitated agricultural transformation and created seasonal employment for labourers during the lean season. Side by side, to overcome the challenges of cultivation during the dry season, farmers were motivated to use surface water by using a low-lift pump (LLP) through the organization of a water user group and deep tube well water through cooperatives. The group and cooperative introduced joint planning for water distribution, managing and operating the capital goods of irrigation, and rural people paid fees for water usage.

All government departments were brought under a single umbrella institution called TTDC, and decentralized administration was practiced by integrating the efforts of experts at the Thana level and the wisdom of local people. Departmental officials trained cooperative leaders and model farmers by providing technical assistance and disseminating new technology and information. Subsequently, two-tier cooperatives were introduced to fill the gap in effective institutions for small farmers at the grassroots. At the village level, there was a primary cooperative society, namely the farmers' cooperative. At the sub-district level, the Thana Central Cooperative (TCCA) served as a federation of cooperatives. Eventually, the initiatives were found to be successful in developing some institutions, namely the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), Upazila Complex (UC), and Bangladesh Rural Development (BRDB), for replicating them across the country. However, the development efforts have faced criticism related to elite capture of cooperatives. Experience shows that the disintegration of activities during the replication of these components by different organizations, along with huge subsidies, encouraged elite people to capture cooperative management (Khan, H. A., 1983 & Khan, A. R., 1979).

However, the Saemaul model was introduced to reduce rural-urban inequality and the psychological roots of agrarian poverty. Launched in 1970 under the leadership of President Park Chung-hee, it was a centrally controlled initiative by engaging rural people. As a core value, the program emphasized *diligence, cooperation, and self-help*. The program developed an operational definition for transforming the concept into reality by adopting specific practices. It promoted a culture of a can-do spirit by changing mindsets and practicing principles in real life. Regarding diligence, a culture of hard work was practiced by villagers who woke up early in the morning, assembled for cleaning and repairing community infrastructure by themselves. The philosophy of self-help was operationalized by arranging land for infrastructure through their own initiatives and mobilizing labour for implementing the infrastructure of rural areas. A culture of cooperation was practiced by changing thatched roofs to tile roofs by supporting each other.

The program was implemented in three stages from 1971 to 1979, with each stage lasting three years. Stage 01 focused on developing basic local infrastructure, including widening village roads, embankments along stream beds, community centre construction, and repairing thatched roofs. Stage-2 focused on constructing advanced farm roads, mechanizing agriculture, rural electrification, and introducing telecommunications grids, along with off-season employment through the sameaul factory for producing cottage products. The fourth phase focused on the nationwide dissemination of philosophy from rural to urban areas and other institutions. In the first stage, 335 bags of cement and 0.5 tons of iron rods were distributed equally to all 33,267 participating villages, followed by competitive reward injections to high-performing communities. In the second phase, inter-ministerial efforts supported villagers' initiatives with a flexible budgetary framework along with matching funds from the community's contribution. In the third phase, the National Agricultural Cooperative Federation (NACF) came forward to provide a soft loan. In this way, the program gradually moved away from total government dependency through inter-ministerial budgetary support and the NACF. Thus, it tackles the criticism of its authoritarian and Top-down mobilization by engaging the private sector (Hwan Park Jin, 1998, & Kim, D. K., 2012).

4. Community Leadership Process

Defining community leadership, Dr Khan mentioned leadership is a disciplined practice of transforming a disorganized community into a self-reliant institution through *strict honesty, tireless persuasion, and a "farsighted"* refusal to compromise long-term stability for short-term comfort. This requires uncompromising in building the character, capital, and collective strength of the people. Dr. Khan prefers local selection and qualities such as a *sense of identity and responsibility to the community, trustworthiness*, rather than just traditional figures of status. The leaders should stimulate others who may be backward or slow through their own example—ensuring that development was tailored to the community's specific needs and sustained through local ownership (Khan, A. H., 1983).

As a process, cooperative members usually select one manager and one model farmer to work as a change agent in managing the cooperative and agriculture development, respectively. They were trained in weekly training organized at UCCA. The information was disseminated in the weekly meeting of the primary cooperative society. Besides these two community leaders, some more community leaders were there, like women leaders, religious leaders, functional leaders for supporting accounts keeping, and midwives for supporting during childbirth. They were trained by the initiatives of UCCA and different departments (Khan, A. H., 1983).

In the case of Saemaul, the leadership served as the "middle agent," bridging the gap between government and community. As part of the process, the village council selected one male and one female young leader in each village through a democratic process, replacing traditional local leaders with ties to politics or state machinery. After selection, they had to complete two rigorous training courses at the Saemaul Training Centre (STC). The first was a seven-day basic-level course focused on developing an ideological foundation based on the spirit of SU. The second was an 11-day rigorous, disciplined residential program focused on real-world case studies to build stamina and a strong work ethic by exposing them to initiatives from different communities. The male leaders were responsible for project preparation, financial coordination, and reforming villagers' behaviour through practice. In contrast, the female leaders were responsible for modernizing women's day-to-day life by establishing a daycare centre, promoting thrift and savings, reducing unnecessary spending on various social events, and modernizing their kitchens, etc (Kim, D. K. 2012).

In both cases, the villagers usually choose new local leaders, who then undergo a scrutiny process during training. But in the case of CM, training was regular weekly sessions that focused more on economic progress. At the same time, SU tried to focus on changing mindsets, stimulated by observing the example of others. However, in both cases, it became clear that community leadership is not an inborn characteristic of inheritance but a disciplined, institutional process for persuading people to attain the community goal.

5. Exploring Areas of Community Leadership in New Rural

For an evolving, climate-resilient green rural economy fostered by digital innovation, the institutional structure of the CM can be reformed, and competitive, performance-based support from SU can be applied. The specific areas of intervention are as follows:

- **Digital Club:** By revitalizing the TTDC concept, all existing Apps related to production and marketing can be brought under a single digital hub under the Upazila Parishad. The tech-savvy local young people concerned about society at the village level can be trained. Moreover, physical attendance at weekly meetings and regular training can be replaced by developing a digital platform. The Saemaul principles, performance-based support for capital goods of the Digital Club, can be introduced.
- **Climate Resilient Cooperative:** By organizing young farmers at the village level to introduce climate-resilient varieties, Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), monitor local weather, and provide information to farmers by using and analysing real-time data through IoT-based smart irrigation and disease detection, can be promoted. Moreover, an Integrated Farm System that combines livestock, fisheries, and crops, using waste from one sector in another, can be integrated for introducing the circular economy, optimizing resource efficiency and diversifying income streams. The cooperation philosophy of CM and SU is vital for interaction with different sector farmers.

- **Climate-resilient infrastructure;** Rural Works program can be renovated with climate-resilient infrastructure, establishing solar irrigation, canal digging, and waste management plants for a circular economy through reduction, reuse, and recycling. The government may provide support through capital investment in technology by following the SU performance-based support.
- **Inclusiveness:** To ensure inclusiveness, resource-poor families can be trained in repairing climate-resilient technology, household appliances, supporting vermicomposting, tricho compost and waste management. The diligence and Self-help concepts of SU and TTDC concept of CM, along with the value addition centre following the Saemaul Factory concept for value addition of primary products under women leadership, can be promoted through cooperative leadership.

Conclusion

The new rural context requires integrating support of government, the private sector and community initiatives to align the changed rural economy. The experiences of CM and SU suggest that social and economic transformation of rural areas can be optimized by persuading community members, with local leadership having a development mentality and concern for the community. In the new environment, reengineering the institutional frameworks of the CM to address climate challenges and inequality requires integrating digital technology with the community's innovation. The principles of the SU for developing a strong work ethic and hard work can add value to community leadership. Additionally, the Saemaul learning to change policy, according to changing circumstances and performance-based support, may help develop the efficiency of resource usage. Local Community leadership with skilled, innovative, proactive, and assertive traits, and a strong network of different stakeholders, may persuade people properly. This will ultimately foster grassroots action and the achievement of sustainable development.

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