large extent. This sector has been exempted from any type of tax by the government, which makes it a high potential sector for large-scale livelihoods.

Government should encourage co-operative societies so that the middleman can be removed and the farmers can get good price for their produce. The practice of introducing support prices on various crops by the government has been a good practice to encourage the farmers to continue agriculture. Participants identified few limitations that make agriculture a risky enterprise and by addressing these barriers sustainable development of the sector will be ensured. The barriers are unpredicted weather conditions, fluctuations in prices of crops in the market, perishable commodity, rigid mind set of the farmers in adopting technologies, non availability of soft loans to farmer or a long process to be followed for approval of loans, exploitation by middlemen and marketing of the produce. Since large areas in the country are under dry land farming, more emphasis of research should be on inventing new techniques and technologies for dry land farming. Educated rural youths should be encouraged to undertake it as livelihood because maximum benefits could be availed by them. Awareness campaigns should be carried out to spread information on new technologies in the sector.

Strengthening Local Institutions – An Emerging Issue

The example of Panchayati Raj was cited as an initiative without any preparation. The original idea was to transfer power to the people but because of lack of knowledge and awareness of the decentralised approach, few selected people are enjoying its benefits. The participants in the consultations showed faith in the Panchayati Raj system and added that the process of decentralisation is a key to any type of implementation because local institutions so established enjoy the respect and faith of the community. However, the system needs to be made an effective tool to trigger and promote sustainable development. After implementing the Panchayati Raj for a certain number of years, it is important to remove the barriers and to encourage participation of communities for self-development.

Panchayati Raj can be successful after improving the awareness levels and

empowering the rural people. Right to Information should be an obligatory component of every programme. More stress should be given on inter-personal campaign for creating awareness. It was stressed that the planning process should start from the grassroots and implementation should be done together with the government and the grassroots representatives. The original concept of Panchayati Raj of Mahatma Gandhi was a 5 tier system (village, block, district, state and national) and would have ensured 80% representation from rural and 20% representation from urban areas. But the existing system is of three tiers (Village, Block and District) and hence the system has lost its impact. The role and responsibilities should be spelt out and disseminated very clearly to all the stakeholders to increase their accountability and ownership towards the activities.

The Way Ahead

One major solution to all four priorities mentioned above - eradication of poverty, arresting population growth, regeneration of the natural resource base and improved productivity of the economy - lies in the widespread creation of sustainable livelihoods.

The creation of sustainable livelihoods requires fundamental changes in the choice of technology, financing systems and the functioning of the marketplace. It also needs strengthening of the institutions of local governance, which must now be designed to create a sense of ownership by the local people over the resources on which they depend for their livelihoods, and the decision systems that guide their lives.

Local, (especially grassroots) empowerment will enable every man, woman and youth, including indigenous people and the socially disadvantaged, to participate in decision-making. It will promote social accountability and will be sensitive to all living creatures and the environment. Local empowerment will also facilitate the right attitude towards learning, preserve our heritage, health-care and family norms. It will encourage development and application of locally appropriate science and technology that is relevant and improve lifestyles without hurting the environment. It will reduce strife and promote social harmony, economic well being and peace. ❏

This assessment could be possible with the support of partner organisations in India and EARTH COUNCIL.