

Multi Nation Program



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A rural development specialist, B. Rajsekhar belongs to the prestigious Indian Administrative Service (IAS), where he has focused his career on developing innovative systems and institutional frameworks to improve the lives of vulnerable populations. He currently oversees the Society for the Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), which fosters the empowerment and economic self-sufficiency of over 10 million rural poor women. While on fellowship, B. Rajsekhar explored public health initiatives and food security programs to help him improve the health of vulnerable populations in Andhra Pradesh.

B. Rajsekhar observed that "The canvas of public health is highly varied and encompasses many academic disciplines that include behavioral sciences, health education, biostatistics, environmental health, epidemiology, international/global health, maternal and child health, nutrition, and more. Thus in many ways the contours and contents of public health policies in the U.S. get determined by the market forces, and consequently too the quality of life of vulnerable populations - children, women, African Americans, Latinos, etc."

He found it especially interesting that such a significant amount of U.S. public health funding is directed toward international global health, noting that "While it is so impressive that the U.S. global health policy is to improve the well-being of millions of people in developing countries through increased access to life-saving goods and services, the biggest surprise/shocking element is the fact that food insecurity, which is a euphemism for hunger, is rising in the U.S. Visits to a few food banks and discussions on initiatives like the Philadelphia GROW Project at Drexel University's School of Public Health reveal shocking stories of hunger in America - an invisible epidemic." He studied the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, as well as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP), all informative examples in the context of the Indian Food Security Bill that is proposed to be introduced in their next Parliament session.

B. Rajsekhar was intrigued to learn about a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Demonstration Project for promoting economic self-sufficiency to improve child health, which is based on the concept of peer lending. The model has been shown to have lasting positive effects on families' economic, social and physical well-being, and to help women grow and sustain their support networks and strengthen their communities. He stated: "My biggest learning in this Eisenhower fellowship is that the new paradigm of development that SERP initiated in the state of Andhra Pradesh - the empowerment process through social mobilization and building organizations of the poor - is universally applicable."

B. Rajsekhar reported that "There was an overwhelming response to SERP's empowerment model of development from the co-Eisenhower Fellows, the U.S. universities, and the NGOs I visited. The greatest feeling at the end of the fellowship is the satisfaction of forging a big network of friends and allies in the U.S. and 18 other countries, and of enlisting their co-operation and understanding to better the lives of the millions of poor people in India. The Eisenhower fellowship, in a way, has been a transformational event in my life. The fact that nearly 20 action points emerged out of this seven-week fellowship will, I'm sure, result in bettering the lives of the 10 million rural women in Andhra Pradesh served by SERP."

While on fellowship, B. Rajsekhar made arrangements for Dr. Gary Fields, Professor of Economics at Cornell University, to speak at the International Alternative Micro-Finance Summit that is being co-hosted by SERP in June 2011 at Hyderabad, India. He also initiated talks with several prominent schools of public health to facilitate internships with SERP, and is exploring partnership opportunities with various NGOs he visited while in the U.S. that work in the areas of health, nutrition and disabilities.

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