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TOWARDS AN AGENDA FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

SUPPORTIVE OF THE EFFORT

TO REACH THE RURAL POOR

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TOWARDS AN AGENDA FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

SUPPORTIVE OF THE EFFORT

TO REACH THE RURAL POOR

Introduction

This is the second of two papers concerned with research required to support the effort to improve substantially the levels of living of the rural poor in the LDCs, and to obtain a more equitable long-term sharing by them in the fruits of development. The first paper, entitled Research and Information Required to Support the Effort to Reach the Rural Poor was an analytical compilation of the nondirective responses obtained from 29 AID officials to the open-ended question implied in the paper's title. Since that paper is being circulated together with this one, the reader is referred to its table of contents for an outline of how these 29 officials addressed the issue. Note that their responses were classified into twelve sections, four of which were concerned with "AID policies and procedures", five with "methods of research", and three with "subjects of research". See also the Introduction to that paper for the method of classification used and the attendant problems.

Following submission of the first paper, AA/TA Samuel H. Butterfield requested that I recommend to the Agency an agenda for social science research which AID should support. Thus, whereas the first paper is a presentation of the opinions of others, this paper represents my own judgment. However, I hasten to add that my recommendations have been greatly informed and influenced by those expressed by the 29 AID officers interviewed. As acknowledged in the earlier paper, I am greatly indebted to these officers who gave so liberally of their time and thought.

The present paper has two major sections. The first lays out four assumptions concerning the nature of rural society and the rural development process which I have learned principally from fourteen years of direct field involvement in rural development in certain LDCs of Asia, Africa and Latin America and three years in the USA. Presentation of my assumptions at the beginning of the paper will make it easy, I hope, for those who entirely disagree with them to turn to other more productive matters than the recommendations for research which are based on these assumptions.

The second section lays out a simple agenda in the form of three priorities which follows from the assumptions and is consistent with my own rural development experience. In the event that the First, Second, and Third Priorities are not followed, discrete items of research are proposed as substitutes for them in a Fourth Priority.

Assumptions

1. The rural poor in any locality are part of an ongoing local socio-cultural-political-economic system (social system, for short) of production and exchange, of sets of patterned relationships and interactions between families and persons based on a complex of mutual rights and obligations, a system which is fulfilling the basic need-dispositions of most of its members most of the time, and is doing so within their means of land, capital, labor, technology, and organization, within acceptable risk limits, and in keeping with their norms of behavior.^{1/}

^{1/}Of course, physical catastrophes such as a prolonged drought in the Sahel, a succession of high floods in Bangladesh, or a devastating earthquake in Peru overwhelm for a time any social system and create a need for massive relief to avoid large loss of life and to reduce the time required for the social system to recover and to cope again with its environment.

2. Government agencies do not develop rural areas; rural people operating within their social systems do so. Government agencies do presently and can in the future help or hinder rural people by altering the larger context of development (taxation, export-import policies, maintenance of physical security, etc.) and by the substance, form and timing of supplemental development inputs (such as materiel, credit, information, organizational and technical skills) offered to assist them to fulfill their individual and group need-dispositions.

3. An agency of the government (or any other entity outside the rural social system), which would assist the rural poor to produce more and to fulfill their need-dispositions more effectively and efficiently, can do so only if it understands the present operating rural social systems as each is understood by those who compose it; and then offers assistance which in substance, form, and timing fits the real supplemental input needs of the poor as determined by and with them.

4. To increase the absolute and proportional social-political-economic benefits to the rural poor on a more-or-less self-sustaining basis requires in most LDCs a continuity of central government inputs to supplement local inputs for a minimal period of 15-20 years, and in most LDCs an even longer period, say of the order of 25-30 years.

5. Since international development resources are very small compared to the total costs of inputs for rural development, they may be most effectively used to establish within each assisted LDC an institutional capacity to understand its rural social systems, and thus to maximize the utilization of its internal resources both governmental and local.

Statement of these five assumptions may be helpful in ridding us of certain pervasive myths which have plagued some of the rural development efforts

of LDCs and international assistance agencies. Most pernicious is the characterization of rural people as the "masses" when, in fact, rural people everywhere, I have found, even those in the most remote regions of Africa and Latin America, are participants with particular status/roles in complex on-going social systems. To approach them as if they were a static, moribund, amorphous mass of individuals or families waiting to be "targeted" and "organized" to carry out a plan created by government officials not only ensures failure, but is gratuitously insulting to them. While every person engaged in rural development probably would agree with this statement, the point is that their actual approaches to rural people often do not reflect the systematic knowledge and consequent understanding of and respect for the rural social systems with which they deal. Real understanding and the respect it brings are essential, although they are not by themselves sufficient to accelerate the rural development process.

A second myth is that LDC government officials responsible for rural development have the requisite knowledge and understanding of their rural societies to enable them to plan rural development programs which will improve substantially the levels of living of the rural poor and obtain a more equitable long-term sharing by them in the fruits of development. Unfortunately, this statement is seldom ever true. For the most part these officials have grown up in towns or cities where ruralites, especially farmers, are looked down upon as ignorant, unorganized, simple folk. Few of those officials who were themselves born in rural areas are better informed, as most were taught from infancy that they must get out of the countryside and into the towns where opportunities for education, white-collar jobs and the "real life" awaited them. Even those still fewer officials who grew up and participated in a rural social system are not appreciably better

off, because they know only one such system, the one in which they grew up and that subjective knowledge was gained many years ago as a child or youth, not as a responsible adult member of the system. What is lacking in all of these cases is systematic, current, objective knowledge of even one rural social system, much less of the several needed to gain the level of understanding requisite to providing the kinds of supplementary development assistance which a wide range of rural social systems will need.

These statements concerning their lack of knowledge are meant in no way to disparage LDC officials concerned with rural development. On the contrary, I have found that most of those with whom I have dealt in a number of countries are very intelligent, able and hard-working--but without either the systematic knowledge and understanding of their rural society, or even more important, the tools of analysis necessary to acquire such knowledge and understanding. I might add what is probably already evident that few U.S. technical assistance and mission managerial personnel are any better equipped to gain the necessary systematic knowledge of rural social structure and functioning. They, like their LDC counterparts, have not been taught either the necessity for or provided with the tools of analysis of social systems. Again, this observation is not meant to be disparaging but simply to establish a factual basis for action to correct the situation. For I have found that both U.S. and LDC personnel welcome the opportunity to acquire and apply the tools of socio-cultural analysis, and prove to be apt students and enthusiastic proponents of as thorough an understanding of the social environment as of the specialized environments with which they are primarily concerned in their technical or

administrative roles. The ultimate intent of this paper is to afford them more opportunities to learn than they have had in the past.

The third myth to be disposed of is that government-controlled inputs are primary and that development systems should be built around them. On the contrary, when one understands a rural social system it is readily apparent that the inputs of land, labor, capital, technology and organization inherent to the rural social system itself are the primary resources and configurations for development, whereas those supplied by government are very much smaller and must, if they are to be effective, complement those which are already integrated into a working social system. The range of supplemental inputs by government must be broad enough to cover the deficiencies revealed by comprehensive rural systems analysis (and jointly agreed upon with system participants) and include, in addition to physical inputs, such skills, if required, as assisting rural people to adapt their existing organizations to equitable development, and such authority as the devolution to local bodies of certain powers required for development.

Research and Information Needs and Priorities

If the above-stated assumptions may be accepted as valid (and the corresponding myths disposed of), it follows that the greatest informational or research need of LDC governments is to learn systematically and to understand (1) the structure and functioning of its rural social systems, with particular attention to the statuses, roles and problems of the poor within these systems, and (2) the substance, form and timing of those inputs that

best supplement those furnished by the system and which are required for both the short- and long-term benefit of the poor. It is also apparent that when an LDC government learns through analyses of its rural social systems what is required by the rural poor, it will be in a position to determine what its own needs are for inputs from abroad, and of these what it will need to secure from international development agencies.

It will be noted that no separate treatment has been accorded the technical and other information needed by the rural poor and the other participants in rural social systems. This was an intentional oversight, simply because the analysis of these systems will reveal to rural development officials the specific kinds of information needed, and thus enable the LDC government to provide this information at the time and in the place and form where it is required. It will also enable LDCs to establish or reorder their extension and other informational systems in such a way as to meet these need-dispositions and periodically to determine new need-dispositions of the rural poor as the rural social systems themselves change.

First Priority:

AID should give its highest research/information priority to assistance in the establishment in every LDC which seeks assistance from AID for rural development of a "Rural Analysis and Feedback Team" (so christened by Sam Butterfield and referred to hereafter in this paper as a RAFT)^{1/} each led by an economist, an anthropologist/sociologist, all nationals, of course, of the country concerned.

^{1/} The operations of a "RAFT" and the results obtained are beautifully described in "Data Collection Designed to Support Rural Development Programs -- The Case of Vihiga, Kenya" by Peter F. Weisel. Copies are available from Jerry French, TA/DA.

Through a variety of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the team would

(1) Give methodological assistance to rural development entities of government to make baseline studies, including anthropological (holistic) analyses of representative local rural social systems whose poor the government proposes to assist in their development, as a means of understanding with their participants how the systems work; and to determine the substance, form and timing of inputs required of the government to supplement those provided by each system itself in meeting the development needs of its poor.

(2) Make similar baseline studies of other local rural social systems not receiving the special supplementary inputs of the rural development program in order to control for the "normal" forces which are making for change in both aided and unaided social systems.^{1/}

(3) Analyze periodically during and at the conclusion of rural development programs in an area their effectiveness and efficiency in providing inputs which meet the developmental needs of the poor, as compared to development "naturally" occurring in the control areas, and ascertain the constraints and opportunities which face the poor and those who would assist them in both program and control areas.

(4) Assist the rural poor and the government and USAID planners to use jointly the knowledge generated in (1), (2) and (3) to design new projects of assistance to the rural poor and to make such changes in existing project designs as will best supplement local efforts and achieve the benefit incidence sought.

^{1/} This assumes that the demand for technical and administrative personnel and the money costs of other forms of supplemental inputs, even when the participants are required to share costs to the maximum extent possible, will be too great for any government to mount a supplemental inputs program in more than a few additional areas each year.

Full involvement of all local institutions composing the rural social system in the decision to study the system, and in data gathering, analysis and feedback is, of course, essential to the attainment of the purposes of such studies, (since less than the required knowledge can be learned by outsiders about the system without the willing participation of its institutions and other components).

In performing the four functions outlined above, especially (3) the leaders of the RAFT should be responsive to the needs as they arise of rural development project leaders and policy planners for reliable information and assessments required for decision-making. To the extent possible, RAFT should arrange meetings in which this information would be provided directly to the concerned officials by the rural poor themselves. Such meetings would also permit the local people to raise issues of importance to them and in turn to gain from the officials an understanding of those national priority needs and external realities such as balance of payments which impinge on local development issues.

Although it would be desirable for RAFT baseline studies to precede substantive rural development programs, RAFTs may begin their work at any time in an existing rural development project area by mounting studies parallel to the operation of current rural development efforts. When the desired insights are gained and a new program devised jointly by the poor and RD personnel, it may be put into effect in the following year. Thus, systematic study of rural social systems does not require that operational efforts be blocked until the study is completed, but that the program be redirected when the new directions become available.

In establishing RAFTs USAIDs may be helpful to LDC governments in a variety of supportive ways, such as:

(1) Locating those LDC economists, anthropologists and sociologists who have been well-trained at home or abroad, but who may be presently assigned to positions not using their training, in order that they may be considered for assignment to the team.

(2) Providing U.S. social scientists to assist in the establishment and operation of the team, including instruction of team members in the adaptation of appropriate research methods to the task at hand, and in providing methodological guidance to rural development practitioners in the making of baseline and follow-on studies.

(3) Augmenting the work of the team by enlisting qualified social and other scientists from the universities and other LDC entities to provide analyses of operational problems and strategic issues as they surface through the analyses and studies conducted by the team and by rural development practitioners, but which are beyond its time and manpower resources to undertake.

(4) Arranging for the rotation of all USAID and host government rural development personnel to the team as field data gatherers for periods of several weeks each to orient them to the social systems of the rural poor and to gain an understanding of how the rural poor cope with the real world, and how they can be helped and not hindered in developing themselves and their areas.

(5) Providing opportunities for university students especially those in the social and behavioral sciences, to learn-by-doing through participation in field data gathering, data analysis and feedback to operational personnel.

It follows that each USAID's own primary informational need is to know how best to assist its LDC government (1) to provide supplemental inputs leading to the kinds of development of its rural social systems which bring benefits to their poorer members, and (2) to make such changes in the larger context of rural development (such as policies and programs of taxation, export-import controls, and the maintenance of security) as may be shown to be required to accelerate rural development. But this knowledge is clearly dependent in large part upon the results of the analyses of the rural social systems described above. It is these analyses which USAID and the LDC government should summarize and project in order to determine both the patterns of supplementary inputs required by rural social systems and the larger contextual changes required. Summaries and projections of the type described might best be done jointly by the LDC planning commission or its equivalent and the USAID program office (or its contractor). They will undoubtedly uncover a number of issues on which specific research is needed and in which the USAID may wish to participate in its continuing search for knowledge of how it might best assist the host government.

Second Priority

After developing the baseline data process, each RAFT should inventory, analyze and summarize for each major ethnic group in the LDC (or other regional entity sufficiently different to warrant separate attention for development purposes) the sociological/anthropological/political science/economics empirical field research results which have been produced in the last several decades, and determine (a) the meaning that these research results appear to have for the design and execution of programs designed to reduce poverty on a long-term self-sustaining basis; and (b) the

specific researches required to fill any research lacunae discovered in the first step of the exercise, the results of which are believed to be required to give proper guidance to policy-makers.

To the extent possible, those investigators, both foreign and host country, who carried out the researches which have been inventoried and are proposed for analysis and summary, should be invited to participate in the analysis-summary-policy guidance exercise, and in the follow-on research if any, designed to fill the research lacunae. However, in the follow-on research programs foreigners should participate only on a partnership basis with researchers from the host country. Research results should be published first in the most appropriate language of the host country to maximize its early utilization by policy-makers. Publications abroad of English or other language translations would follow. Maximum participation of all LDC and USAID policy-makers and practitioners concerned with rural development in the planning of this overall exercise and in the application of the results phase should be encouraged through a series of seminars or other appropriate means.

Third Priority

Exploitation of the baseline and subsequent studies of rural social systems by RAFTs, and analyses, summaries, and policy guidance derived from past sociological/anthropological/political science/economics researches in each LDC will provide to AID/W a large part of what it needs to know in order to formulate Agency-wide and regional rural development operational policies, and to develop requests to the Congress for inputs to LDC rural poverty programs which are solidly based on the realities experienced by the rural poor in their social systems. Proper exploitation of these

data will require the enlistment of the best-qualified social scientists in the USA in cross-national comparative analysis, perhaps first on a regional basis conforming to AID's own regional organization and using those competent USA research institutions already working in these regions. To ensure that the research work proposed by these USA institutions remains grounded in the realities and problems of the rural poor of the LDCs, it is suggested that for each AID region a board composed of RAFT heads from the LDCs be convened to review all research proposals and the research results produced by these institutions.

As is apparent, I hope, the three priorities sketched above logically conclude a research agenda oriented to the heart of rural poverty, the rural poor themselves. We began with systematic study of the social systems of which the rural poor are a part and the objective and subjective realities within which they live. From the knowledge and understanding which such continuing study brings, we can then proceed to determine how the LDC governments may best supplement the maximum efforts of the rural poor themselves, and, in turn, how AID may best assist these LDC governments in their efforts. This is a practical approach in keeping with both the level of resources available to AID and the norm of helping LDC's to develop an institutional capability to help themselves. And, I believe, it is one which will bring the kind of current relevant knowledge and understanding that will enable the rural poor to improve their own lot.

However, adoption by the Agency of this "poor-centered" approach to research (and action) would represent quite a departure from the pragmatic eclecticism characterizing AID's usual "program-centered" approach to

development. Therefore, in the event that more discrete research items than those presented above in the first three priorities are desired, I have included as a fourth priority a set of research activities which are selected from amongst those suggested by my AID colleagues and described in the first paper.

Fourth Priority:

No significance should be attached to the order in which the four items are presented below, as I consider all of them to be essential in the event that the First, Second, and Third Priorities are not followed.

1. Compilations of relevant empirical field research bearing on rural poverty. In the Second Priority above, it was suggested that such compilations be made on a country basis. This continues to be my recommendation since anti-rural poverty programs will be created by LDC governments, and they will be (and should be) most influenced by studies made within their own countries. However, if compilations are not to be done on a country basis, it is suggested that they be made by each of the social science disciplines--sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, etc. for those studies within their own respective fields carried out on LDC populations. This is not as horrendous a task as it may at first appear simply because until quite recently so little research has taken into account differentials of rural poverty. The major purpose to be served by these compilations is to generate a range of general propositions solidly rooted in empirical research which can be used as guidance by LDC and international agency rural development officials. These would then gradually replace those which have been devised by articulate practitioners with little or no reference to empirical field research.

2. Anthropological (holistic) analyses. As reported in Section 7 of the first paper, there appears to be within AID a large and growing appreciation for studies which comprehend the whole situational context in which the poor live. Such studies have been done in the past largely by anthropologists, community sociologists and social geographers, but they may be done, of course, by members of any discipline with the requisite methodological skills and theoretical insights. As is probably evident, such analyses are place-specific. Therefore, the first step is a compilation of that which has been done for each socio-cultural-ethnic group in each LDC along the lines suggested in Item 1 above together with salient conclusions, and a laying-out of further research needed to give an adequate picture of how each group has been able to adapt to changes in its environment and to develop its potential.

3. Experimental design studies. As described in the First Priority section, a major function of each RAFT is to make baseline, interim and termination studies, not only in areas given special supplemental assistance for development of the rural poor, but also in control areas where only the "normal" forces for change are operating. However, in the event that an LDC does not establish a RAFT, AID should set as a precondition to its assistance the before-and-after measurement of one or more control areas as well as measurement of the programmed supplemental-input areas. This is the only sure way for the LDC government and AID to determine how effective the supplementary inputs are and, in turn, how the utility of AID's own assistance to the LDC can be maximized. So-called "informed judgments" by technicians and administrators without before-and-after measurements in both kinds of areas is another name for guessing.

4. Quality-of-life indicators and multi-purpose household survey methodology. What comprises the "quality of life" and how to measure it can be determined only from studies of the actual standards and levels of living, both desired and experienced by those whose quality of life is at issue. Development of such indicators is highly desirable in order to make possible valid and reliable measurements of change, either induced or "normal", in the quality of life, and as criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of development assistance. Standardization of the content and methodology for multi-purpose household surveys should be arrived at in the same way as suggested for quality-of-life indicators and for the same reasons.

James W. Gree
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