

1. SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION	A. PRIMARY Development and economics	DC00-0000-0000
	B. SECONDARY Development assistance	

2. TITLE AND SUBTITLE  
 Targeting as a tool of program and project design

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4. DOCUMENT DATE 1975	5. NUMBER OF PAGES 4p. 5p.	6. ARC NUMBER ARC
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7. REFERENCE ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS  
 MUCIA

8. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES (Sponsoring Organization, Publisher, Availability)  
 (In PASITAM design note no.4)

9. ABSTRACT

10. CONTROL NUMBER <span style="font-size: 1.5em; font-weight: bold;">PN-AAF-113</span>	11. PRICE OF DOCUMENT
12. DESCRIPTORS Project design Targeting	13. PROJECT NUMBER
	<del>CSD-2958 211(A)</del> 14. CONTRACT NUMBER
	CSD-2958 211(A) 15. TYPE OF DOCUMENT

## Targeting as a Tool of Program and Project Design

*A target is an intermediate goal used in measuring progress toward the broader aims of a project or program. The ideal target is a clear, reliable indicator of movement toward a major goal.*

*Translating project goals into targets is a fateful—sometimes fatal—step in program and project design. Targets can be powerful tools of project design and implementation, but they are often used improperly.*

**Item:** Rural development is the goal of an extension program in a Middle Eastern country. The number of on-farm demonstrations by extension agents is used as a measure of progress toward the goal. Farm demonstrations increase enormously, but rural development does not.

**Item:** A rice program in an Asian country includes the eradication of insect pests as a sub-goal. The aggregate number of hectares sprayed is set as a target. But aerial spraying of large areas has negligible impact upon pest control and the spread of rice cultivation.

**Item:** A fertilizer program in an African country uses the number of sacks distributed to farmers as an indicator of program effectiveness. Large numbers are distributed, but farmers discard or sell some and misuse others.

### THE LOGIC OF TARGETING

To set a target is to act on certain assumptions (or to act as if these assumptions can properly be made):

*First*, that ends are known.

*Second*, that appropriate means are also known and available.

*Third*, that measuring the application of means indicates progress toward ends.

When these assumptions are sound, targets can be used as simplifying, summarizing indicators of the state

of complex efforts to move toward some goal or goals. Note, however, that these assumptions require reliable knowledge of the cause-effect relations in the situation.

Targeting techniques evolved in engineering fields where there are many tested indicators of cause-effect relations. Items such as yards of earth excavated, welds completed, or concrete poured can index progress in building a road, a ship, or a dam. Given reliable and valid knowledge, targeting can be used to monitor progress, schedule and reschedule activities which must be synchronized, identify lags or danger spots, and otherwise serve the aims of planning, management, and control.

### TARGETING IN UNCERTAIN SITUATIONS

With proper care and understanding, targeting can also be used in situations much less certain than those found in engineering activities. Uncertainty means imperfect knowledge about goals, about means-ends relations, or both. When *everything* is uncertain there is no basis for action. The most definite knowledge is likely to be about inputs—units of material, time, and effort—into a program or project. Inputs which can be measured and controlled become possibilities for target setting. In addition to flows of inputs, accomplishment of certain kinds of intermediate objectives can often be “measured” or determined in a relatively precise fashion, e.g., amount of land leveled, irrigation facilities

Each of these Design Notes states a lesson which may be useful to those engaged in planning, managing, or evaluating development efforts, such as technical assistance projects. A given note may describe a technique and discuss its use, may present and explain a useful concept, or report a functional relationship between some intervention and some outcome. Design Notes are backed by cited evidence from PASITAM studies, published literature, or the reports of development agencies.

Comments and queries are invited, along with requests for additional copies and supplemental materials.

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completed, storage sheds built, etc. Physical achievements—intermediate bricks and mortar outcomes—are also attractive subjects for efforts to set targets.

To use selected inputs as the basis for targets is to know (or assume) that there is a determinate relationship among all inputs and their combined effects. To use intermediate products as the subjects of targets is to know (or assume) how these are causally related to goals. When key inputs must be made by clients or a "target group," important knowledge is often lacking, and false assumptions may be made. Partial inputs and intermediate outcomes may be necessary to achieving project goals—but not sufficient.

Valid information about inputs or intermediate accomplishments can be an utterly unreliable indicator of outcomes. Reliability depends upon knowledge of means-ends relationships. A scarcity of such knowledge is typical of developmental efforts. This is especially true when a means-ends chain is long, e.g., when certain input combinations are expected to increase the volume of outputs, increased outputs are supposed to raise producer incomes, and higher income is supposed to lead to well-being, commitment to more growth in output, an enlarged sense of efficacy and independence, and increased support for the socio-political system.

#### **PATHOLOGIES OF TARGETING**

Guy Hunter has observed that bad targeting can stem from a number of things:

... either from bad central planning, or from failures in a single sector to meet what were reasonably planned deliveries, or (and perhaps most frequently) from an over-ambitious programme, which allows effort on a country-wide scale with resources equal only to two-thirds of the country, or engages simultaneously in half a dozen schemes which all compete for the same administrative resources. (p. 62)

In other words, bad targeting stems from ignorance of sound program and project design principles, willful violation of those principles, or a combination of the two. Sometimes initially sound targeting is falsified by uncontrollable environmental factors. When every reasonable effort has been made to guard against this, a breakdown can only be accepted as a fact of life in an uncertain developmental setting.

Two of the most common pathologies of targeting are *false targeting*, when goals or means-ends relations are not really clear, and *attempting to use targets as substitutes for management*.

*Targeting When Goals Are Unknown.* Larger goals of development projects and programs are often expressed in intangible terms—"promoting rural development," "increasing peasant income," "improving the health of a target group," etc.

Vague goals can be useful and are sometimes necessary. They can minimize conflicts. They can help mobilize support for a line of action—general goals are usually virtuous. They can enable action to begin when the problem is more obvious than the most appropriate solution. When it is necessary to act in highly uncertain circumstances, wise men will opt for intangible goals if only to minimize their own vulnerability. Progress may be assessed impressionistically and defended or indexed by illustrations such as "appropriate events" or deliveries of means.

But there is a trade-off. Intangible goals are incomplete guides to concrete action and an insufficient basis for systematic evaluation. How shall rural development be determined? What is a proper and effective level of increase in peasant incomes? What is an adequate improvement in health?

When goals or means-ends relations are not clear, premature targeting is a serious design risk. Targets become *de facto* goals, although their logical soundness is not established. See the examples at the beginning of this note.

*Targets as False Substitutes for Management.* Targets are tools of management and control. Where there is reasonably certain knowledge of means-ends relations, failure to meet a target signals management that there is a problem. When there is a high degree of uncertainty in the situation, the meaning of failure to meet a target is ambiguous.

Targets are sometimes used to standardize and simplify a large-scale effort. Designers reduce the desired action to a set of recipes and minimize the discretion required for implementation. A large volume of activity can thus be made compatible with a very small supply of managerial resources.

Given near-perfect knowledge, this is a sound approach. Lacking such knowledge, it is an invitation to disaster. Targets create a false appearance of certainty. Field forces strive to meet them—or falsify actual accomplishments. When rewards depend upon meeting targets, field personnel will tend to report fulfillment. If the targets are false, achieving them may actually undermine higher goals. Some of the worst results occur when targets are set by central agencies operating with limited knowledge and no direct control over implementation.

*Pathological Targeting: A Case in Point.* Guy Hunter's example of Village Level Workers (VLW) in India succinctly illustrates a pathology of targeting. The VLW Hunter describes is typically assigned to cover 1,000 farm households and is responsible for introducing agricultural innovations. The principal means of carrying out this responsibility are direct contacts with the

farmers and the demonstration of new techniques. Demonstration targets, record keeping, reports, and diaries are primary means of control exercised by senior extension agents.

Measuring VLW performance in terms of the number of demonstrations carried out assumes a direct functional relationship of demonstration to successful innovation. But the effect of demonstrations upon actual adoption of the innovation is not definitely known. Striving to meet their targets, VLW perform far more demonstrations than they can control for content. The attention paid to each demonstration and to each farmer diminishes; quality is lost in the effort to fulfill the target. At best, demonstrations degenerate to "tea-drinking visits." At worst, VLW file false reports or attempt to force farmers to adopt unsuitable innovations. Records indicate dramatic increases in the number of farm demonstrations. Do these "explain" innovation and development?

The answer is supplied by the only important audience, the farmer. In a survey of five Indian states to determine how cultivators learned of or were persuaded to try new methods, more than half cited the VLW while a quarter cited the influence of other farmers. Less than ten percent mentioned demonstrations.

#### EFFECTIVE TARGETING UNDER UNCERTAINTY

Targets can be used as effective tools of planning, management, and control in uncertain situations, provided certain principles are honored:

1. Broad planning goals should not be presented as operational targets. Target-development, rather than stipulated targets, should be made part of an initial

action plan when programs or projects are exploratory or not altogether certain responses to clear needs.

2. Such targets must be treated as contingent and subjected to frequent review—not just in terms of their accomplishment but in terms of their soundness.
3. Targets being set for a client group should be set in consultation, negotiation, or testing with that group and subjected to periodic review, usually as part of an annual or seasonal action planning effort.
4. Targets should be justified by explicit citation of the evidence or experience upon which they are based. When target-setting is part of ongoing programming or project management, targets should be presented in conjunction with appropriate baseline data.
5. Finally, trivial or formalistic targets can be built into a program or project design to satisfy requirements of a programming process which insists upon targets, when the designer knows that sound targeting is not yet feasible.

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Hansen, Gary E. "Indonesia's Green Revolution: The Abandonment of a Non-Market Strategy Towards Change." Working papers of the East-West Technology and Development Institute, East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, n.d.

*This Design Note was prepared by Paul Cunningham and W.J. Siffin.*

The following are among the publications produced by PASITAM in 1975. To order, address your payment in care of the Publications Department, PASITAM, 1005 East Tenth Street, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.

Harbans S. Bhola. *The India Education Project: A Case Study of Institution Building and Organizational Conflict*. (July 1975) \$3.00.

Betru Gebregziabher. *Integrated Development in Rural Ethiopia: An Evaluative Study of the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit*. (September 1975) \$3.00.

Amy Mann, ed. *Institution Building: A Reader*. (October 1975) \$3.00.

Amy Mann and Jan Miracle, eds. *Rural Development: The Interplay of Analysis and Action*. (September 1975) \$3.00.

Michael J. Moravcsik. *Science Development: The Building of Science in Less-Developed Countries*. (July 1975) \$6.00.

Burton E. Swanson. *Organizing Agricultural Technology*

*Transfer: The Effects of Alternative Arrangements*. (October 1975) \$3.00.

Burton E. Swanson. *Alternative Strategies of Training and Project Design for Regional Agricultural Production Programs*. (March 1976) \$3.00.

The following Design Notes are available upon request from the Documentation and Analysis Center, 1005 East Tenth Street, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.

Design Note No. 1. "How Administrative Arrangements Can Influence Program Outcomes." Bloomington, Ind.: PASITAM, September, 1975. (Prepared by Paul Cunningham)

Design Note No. 2. "Effect of Training Programs on Work Behavior." Bloomington, Ind.: PASITAM, September, 1975. (Prepared by Paul Cunningham)

Design Note No. 3. "A Management Information System Model for Multi-Purpose, Multi-Method Rural Development Projects." Bloomington, Ind.: PASITAM, September, 1975. (Prepared by William J. Siffin)

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