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THE "NUTRIBUN" CONNECTION:

The Role of an Anthropologist in the Planning of  
a Philippine Nutrition Project

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## Introduction

Like others in this symposium , I will, in my paper, describe an anthropologist's involvement in a USAID development project, in this case a nutrition project in the Philippines. Perhaps unlike the others, however, I will be discussing the involvement of an anthropologist who was both a "direct-hire" employee of USAID and a staff member of the country-mission which was sponsoring the project. These affiliations may provide something of a different perspective to the symposium's subject and, as we shall see, certainly affected the nature of my involvement in the planning process for this particular project.

The selection of the Philippine nutrition project as the basis for this case study is also not without significance. I chose this example because of the fact that the anthropologist became a member of the planning team quite early in the planning process--well over a year and a half before the major project document (the project paper) was sent into Washington for review. As many of you may know, an early entry of the anthropologist into the planning process of a development project has been advocated by myself and others (such as Hoben 1976 and 1978, and Poe 1977) as a more effective means of incorporating a recognition of socio-cultural variables into a project design.

There is a third aspect of this case which may be the most important of all. That is the close correlation between the anthropological research design and the planning environment. Obviously, the term, "planning environment" is rather vague. For the purposes of this paper, it can be defined as that wide range of factors or variables which influences and is the planning

process for a development project. For example, in this case, the planning environment included such factors as: the characteristics of the project itself; the interests and perspectives of the project-team members; the expectations the planners had of the anthropologist; the documentation requirements and expectations of the project in Washington; deadlines; and even the value systems of high-ranking USAID officials.

Developing the design to incorporate some of the interests, concerns and other variables of the planning environment, helped to insure that research findings would be meaningful and useful to planners. After all, some of the data generated addressed felt-needs expressed by the planners themselves prior to the time the research was begun.

Let us turn now to the case at hand and see how the three factors of affiliation; timing of entry into the planning process; and, adapting the research design to the planning environment combined with others to influence the effectiveness and role of an anthropologist in a USAID project.

### The Project

The Philippine nutrition project that was under consideration for expansion in 1977 actually had its beginnings several years earlier. After some USAID involvement in nutritional surveys in the late 50's and activities designed to lessen the extent of malnutrition among pre-school children in the late 60's, USAID by 1970, became committed to a nutrition project in which the results of food assistance could be measured with respect to changes in individuals known to be malnourished (USAID/Manila 1974: 5-6). Food assistance was to be "targeted specifically for the malnourished segments of the Philippine population.

Following this commitment, two major initiatives were planned. One, the Targeted Maternal Child Health (TMCH) Program, was designed to reach malnourished children from 6 months to 6 years of age and mothers who might be nursing or pregnant again. The other, the Philippine School Nutrition Program (PSNP), hoped to reach elementary-school children who were found to be below nutritional standards. Both programs relied on supplementary feeding as the primary means of distributing Title II food assistance to these two malnourished groups.

By 1974, the two programs together claimed to reach 1.3 million individuals with some form of food assistance (USAID/Manila 1974: 6-7). This performance helped to convince USAID to continue to provide support for these programs and their complementary activities under a project entitled simply, the "Food and Nutrition Project." With a duration from 1974 to 1978, the Food and Nutrition Project boasted a direct monetary input from USAID of about \$1.8 million and approximately \$24.6 million worth of U.S. food commodities (USAID/Manila 1974: 27-28). There were also inputs to the project from the Catholic Relief Service (CRS), the Church World Service (CWS), CARE and the Philippine government (which alone provided inputs valued at over \$28 million).

Relying on this support, the project proposed to extend its activities throughout the Philippines and planned to reach an estimated one-third of all malnourished infants and children less than 14 years of age. This rather ambitious goal meant that the project was to become truly national in its scope. To accomplish these objectives, the TMCH and PSNP programs remained the major tools.

Under PSNP, elementary-school children received "nutribuns." The "nutribun" is a bakery product which resembles a roll made from rye flour. An idea which

originated from the USAID mission in the Philippines, the "nutribun" is actually composed of a variety of nutrients specifically selected to supplement the diet of a malnourished child. Each day while at school, the designated recipients were given a "nutribun" to consume during the course of the school day. In addition, nutrition and principles of a well-rounded diet were included in school curricula.

The TMCH program operated somewhat differently. Within each participating community (barangay or barrio), one or more TMCH centers were established--often at the home of one of the community members who became a TMCH volunteer worker. There, infants and pre-schoolers who had been found to be malnourished after a weight survey of all children in the community (part of Operation Timbang) were eligible to receive, through their mothers, a variety of foods to add to their normal diet. Lactating or expectant mothers were also eligible to receive food supplements. At the center, infants were reweighed and the food distributed at regular intervals. Such gatherings of mothers at the center were also typified by a "mothers' class" which was led by a nutritionist or a nutrition aide. These classes stressed nutrition education or demonstrated new recipes using the distributed food stuffs.

This then, in brief, was the nutrition project that was well underway in 1977 when the USAID mission in the Philippines began planning a new expanded version, entitled, the "Food and Nutrition Outreach Project." To give the reader some idea of the expansion envisioned by the planners, the monetary input from USAID under consideration was roughly \$6.1 million--an increase of about 338% over the existing project. The value of the U.S. food commodities talked about for the years 1979-1983 was approximately \$125 million--about a 400% increase. In addition to increasing the scope of the PSNP and TMCH programs, planners contemplated efforts to increase household and community-level production of nutrient-rich foods and to support expanded multi-level nutrition education programs.

Roles and Expectations of and by the Anthropologist

As part of the planning for this new expanded project, a team of individuals began forming in June of 1977. The team was to examine the existing nutrition project and make recommendations for improving and broadening its on-going activities, while at the same time exploring favorable formats for incorporating the new activities. Two nutritionists, an economist, a food-program administrator, a budget analyst, a USAID program specialist, and an anthropologist (myself) composed the team. All but the economist were staff members of the USAID mission to the Philippines.

Each of the team members was assigned specific tasks and topic areas to cover in the planning process. The role of the anthropologist was influenced by at least two sets of expectations: those held by the other members of the mission staff and the planning team itself; and, those held by the anthropologist. Of the first set, one of the most important was the expectation that the anthropologist perform and write a "social soundness analysis." A documentary requirement in the internal USAID review procedures, the "social soundness analysis" is not dissimilar in intent and scope to the "social impact assessment" requirement for domestic projects funded, at least in part, from federal resources. In the process of performing the "social soundness analysis," the anthropologist was also expected to examine and evaluate the pre-existing project since much of the activities being planned for the new project were a continuation and expansion of earlier programs.

Both of these expectations were quite explicit and clearly stated. However, along with them came some implicit expectations that although unstated, were nonetheless real. One was that as a member of the mission staff and the planning team,

the anthropologist should concentrate his efforts on trying to find ways of improving the design of the nutrition project rather than embarking upon a study of whether or not a nutrition project should be undertaken at all. The mere pre-existence of several of the new project's planned activities also meant that there was some pressure to support or find a workable modification of the existing program formats--due in part, because these continuing activities had built up a fairly powerful bureaucratic inertia.<sup>1</sup>

Once the anthropologist's analysis was complete, the planners expected him to integrate his findings with the work of the other team members. One hoped-for outcome of such an integration was a project paper (or plan) that would be a cohesive whole and which would draw-together the different perspectives of the team members into a manageable nutrition project. Related to this concern was another implicit expectation that was due to the breadth and national scope of the new project. Most of the other team members and the mission staff were searching for and expected to find generalizations that could be applied to all of the Philippines, or at least to all of the proposed operations areas of the new project. The same goal was tacitly applied to the contributions the anthropologist might make.

Into this arena, came the other set of expectations, those which I as the anthropologist held. They were not always different from those described above. For example, I too expected to examine very closely the pre-existing programs and activities of the project. But, in addition to looking at these programs as planning models for emulation, I expected to study the participation of people in these earlier project activities and to describe it as accurately as possible. After gaining some understanding of the behavior of these project participants, I planned to explain the behavior and social setting of the participants to the other team members.

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<sup>1</sup> This expectation was also applied to the other team members as well.

I brought into this work setting another expectation which I had derived from earlier work in planning efforts for other USAID projects (in the Philippines, Sri Lanka and India). Nor was it an expectation envisioned by the other members of the planning team. It was, first, to ascertain some of the major assumptions made by the USAID planners about the behavior and life-style of potential project participants in their models or approaches; then, to test these assumptions during my analyses. This ramification of the anthropologist's role, as I saw it, was to prove helpful in several ways (as we shall see).

Of course, to support all of my activities, I expected freedom to set up the scope and design of my analyses and to undertake them with as sound a methodological format as possible. I also anticipated that I would adapt my analyses to include an exploration of some of the areas of interest voiced by the USAID planners--and generally try to match my research design to the "planning environment."

It is interesting to note that all these expectations and activities were manifested into roles within a planning process which began well over a year before the project paper was due in Washington for review. The fact that an anthropologist had a role in some of the early conceptual stages of the planning process was largely due to the fact that he was present at the USAID mission sponsoring the project as a staff person. In short, there was the opportunity for early involvement.

Being a member of the mission staff also allowed the anthropologist to have repeated and prolonged communication with the previous project manager

and the mission planning team. Such a regular interchange of ideas and the anthropologist's status as a mission staff member combined to make the role of the anthropologist that of an "insider" not an "outsider"--thereby avoiding some of the fears, suspicions or perceived threats that a potentially critical "outsider" often generates in those hopeful of obtaining funding for a project.

#### Research Design and Approaches to the Analysis

Once the role for the anthropologist had been established and the expectations for the role expressed, the question of how to proceed with that role still remained. The answer, I believed, lay primarily in the research design and approaches which would be employed.

First, I knew from previous experience that Washington-based reviewers of development projects and the USAID mission planners themselves usually placed a very high credibility value on quantitative data. The research design, I decided, must therefore include the generation of quantitative data, while also generating qualitative data which could be complimented and supported quantitatively. Without such a capability, I thought the effectiveness of my findings on others in USAID would be deminished. A combination of participant-observation techniques with a social survey instrument seemed a logical solution.

The research design also had to include data from some of the activities of the existing project that would be continued in the new project being planned. One great advantage of having these existing activities was the ability to solicit data about how people had actually participated in them in the past. The analysis could simply document the behavior of previous participants as being indicative of the way participants would continue to behave in similar future activities (quite the reverse from completely new projects where an anthropologist

is put in the position of having to anticipate people's behavior in regard to planned project activities).

Because of staff and budgetary limitations, I decided to focus primarily upon one of the existing project activities, the TMCH program. The TMCH program was selected for a variety of reasons. One reason was that it was very widespread about the country. By design, it also extended its services into the neighborhoods and communities of the participants. Both adults and children participated in the program and it had perhaps the most significant potential for reaching the general population.

The selection of areas for questioning included not only my own ideas but also those obtained from the other planning team members and the existing project manager. As part of the process for determining the research design, I interviewed the team members and project manager informally to discern their interests and problems they had defined. I also asked about the approaches or models of analyses the other team members were applying to their tasks. I did this to discover if the models or approaches made any assumptions about participant behavior. Any such assumptions of significance were added to the list of topics to be investigated.

Due to the national scope of the proposed project and the desire by planners to obtain some broadly applicable generalizations, the research design encompassed field tests and data collection from various regions of the Philippines. Some regions were selected because of the socio-cultural diversity they represented; others were chosen because they fell into the lowland "majority" categories used by the planners. Some of the data for the analysis already existed. The research design incorporated several existing nutritional surveys. This proved helpful in allowing

new data to complement the data the nutritionists were using.

The research was to be carried out over the course of a year--a rather lengthy period, given the amount of time frequently allotted by USAID for social analyses in proposed projects. Again, such a research calendar is due to the early entry of the anthropologist in the planning process. Because the anthropologist was part of the mission staff, the research design also included plans for discussions of early returns of data with other members of the planning team. Modifications of the research format suggested by these conversations were then made at the earlier stages of the research.

#### Some Results and Contributions of the Analysis

As a result of the analysis, there were, I believe, several contributions to the planning process. One, of course, was sufficient material to compile a document to fulfill the "social soundness" requirement for the project paper. But, this was only of relatively minor significance. Of more importance were some of the results that led to an increased understanding of the participant population by the project planners.

For example, the analysis found that there were cultural definitions of "normalcy" for infants and children which fell within the categories of the malnourished as previously defined by the nutritionists (see Jansen 1978: 29-31). About half (47%) of the participant families interviewed considered their child or children to be healthy and "normal" before their children were weighed and declared malnourished by the existing TMCH program. Similarly, even after being exposed to some nutrition education under the existing nutrition project, a little less than half (43%) attributed their child's health to factors other than body weight or diet.

Participants also tended to confuse "balanced nutritional diets" with just the amount of food available. Indeed, more than 75% of the participants interviewed felt they would have enough food available to feed their children without the supplemental foodstuffs they obtained from the TMCH program. About 70% thought they had enough food to feed their children before entering the program. These and other results suggested that the role of nutrition education which reached the household level should be greatly expanded over what had been the case in the existing project (a suggestion which was incorporated into the new project).

Some planners assumed that the relatively high enrollment rates among families eligible to join the TMCH program indicated a growing recognition among participants of malnutrition as a problem and of the relationship between diet and the health of children. Obviously, given the findings, this was not necessarily true. There were other factors motivating families to join. One was the high cultural value which is placed on children generally. Another was the fact that the TMCH program was often introduced as a means of averting an impending health threat (even if it was a misunderstood one) to the child. Not only did this introduction invoke the general fear of ill-health within the social milieu, but it was also made by an individual (usually a nutritionist) with the social status of an educated, knowledgeable professional. The responsibilities of parents as custodians of the child's well-being were also challenged.

The research succeeded in providing information relative to another assumption made by some other team members. That was the assumption that food availability and food usage (or consumption) should be based upon a nuclear family unit. The analysis, however, showed that food availability and usage are actually phenomena of broader scope. While over 75% of the families interviewed had gardens (see

Jansen 1978: 25), food exchanges generally occurred within extended families and between friends. The exchange of food even formed a part of a larger reciprocity system (referred to as "utang na loob") which is commonly present in most lowland communities. Thus, a family did not have to have a garden to have access to home-grown produce. Calculations of food availability and usage, then, would have to accommodate this pattern to avoid being misleading or inaccurate.

The last result of the analysis which I will list here concerns the use of nutrition centers. It was found that each TMCH center tended to serve only the population living in the center's immediate proximity. Nearly all participants walked to the centers and very few lived more than a 15-minute walk from the center. In effect then, each TMCH center had an effective outreach radius which was very small. This finding suggested the need for some modifications in the estimation of the population served by TMCH centers. It also suggested that to increase the population reached by the program would necessarily mean increasing the number of centers.

#### The Effectiveness of the Anthropologist: A Few Closing Observations

In the case of this project, I would say that the anthropologist was fairly effective. But effective in what sense? Certainly, the analysis performed by the anthropologist was effective in increasing the planners' understanding of the average participant in the nutrition project. It was also effective in helping planners judge the meaning of relatively high enrollment rates in the existing project activities. Perhaps most important, however, the anthropologist was about as effective as any other individual member of the planning team in influencing the design of the new project. But, it must be remembered that planning any project is a multi-individual, multi-disciplinary and multi-varient process.

The reasons for being effective in the last sense are several. One was

the "insider" status the anthropologist enjoyed with respect to the project planners. As we have seen, this status was gained from the anthropologist's identity as a fellow member of the mission staff, someone who was subject to the same working environment as the planners. That status also encouraged repeated and continuing communication between the anthropologist and the other project planners during the planning process.

Another was the early involvement of the anthropologist in the project design process. Entering at an early stage meant that the project plan was still relatively changeable and inputs from the anthropologist could be accommodated without significant threat or cost to the plans already developed by others (excluding the fundamental activities of the existing nutrition project). A third factor in making the anthropologist effective was the relatively long period of time available to gather data and to make repeated inputs into the design process. But, this temporal opportunity is certainly related to the early involvement in the design process.

The most important reason for the anthropologist being as effective as he was lies in the adaptation of the research design to the "planning environment." Specifically, interests, concerns and even assumptions held by other members of the planning team were incorporated into the structure of the research. This resulted in the anthropologist's analysis achieving a "built-in" relevancy to the work of the planners. Being relevant according to the planner's own definition of the word meant the results of the analysis automatically increased their potential for being influential with the planners. Incorporating within the research design a data system which the planner's traditionally valued highly also increased the anthropologist's effectiveness. The presentation of at least

some of the research findings quantitatively allowed the results to acquire additional legitimacy and authority within the planners' own value systems.

Such an ecological approach to applied anthropology in the planning of USAID development projects may simply be a variation of the old cultural broker role. Nevertheless, when combined with an early involvement in the planning process and an affiliation with the planning organization (USAID), this approach is the most effective one I have found for influencing project planning.

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