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Anthropological Contributions to the North Shaba Rural Development Project

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by

A. H. Barclay, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

The application of anthropology in rural development projects is of growing interest, both to members of the discipline and to international donor agencies. This paper discusses a major project that is currently underway, in which anthropological contributions have decisively influenced both the design and the strategy for implementation. The magnitude of these contributions has been unusually great, and the project itself has a degree of flexibility that is rarely found in large donor-funded projects.

The project is situated in the North Shaba region of Zaire, approximately 400 miles north of Lubumbashi. Its main objective is to stimulate small farmer maize production by building on existing agricultural practices, in order to generate a marketable

¹ The author is a permanent staff member of Development Alternatives, Inc., a Washington-based firm specializing in rural development. The firm assisted with the design of the North Shaba Project, and is currently providing technical assistance during the implementation phase. Sources for this paper include three months of fieldwork with the project over the past year, documentation related to the project, and discussions with members of the project design team, especially Charles F. Sweet and Thomas and Pamela Blakely. The latter bear no responsibility for the views presented in this paper.

surplus that will raise farm incomes within the area, and also supply food to the mining and urban populations of South Shaba. The project area covers 15,000 square kilometers in Kongolo and Nyunzu zones, along the border with Kivu region. The population of 135,000 consists of Bahemba, Baluba (Shaba) and Pygmy groups, with density highest in the Bahemba areas of Kongolo zone, on the east bank of the Lualaba River. The total funding of approximately \$20 million over a six-year (1976-82) period is shared almost evenly between the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) and the Government of Zaire.

Zaire, a victim of an "unending crisis" (Young 1978) that is at least partially self-inflicted, offers forbidding prospects for any serious effort at rural development. The country's macroeconomic and political situation, which was already bleak when the North Shaba Project was designed three years ago, has continued to deteriorate. Obviously, there are factors beyond the control of project staff and the donor agency that could prevent its continuation, let alone the achievement of sustainable, beneficial impact. This discussion does not attempt to speculate on the interplay of those factors, however. It focuses instead on the micro level, which is the domain of anthropologists, and on the roles of key actors -- project designers, implementers and participating farmers -- in the evolution of the project thus far.

ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT: CURRENT TRENDS

The involvement of anthropologists in the North Shaba Project does not represent a unique case. During the past five years, both the World Bank and AID have placed increasing emphasis on equity considerations, thereby requiring an understanding of the dynamics of socioeconomic change. Policy instructions designating the amorphous category of "the rural poor" as the critical "target group" for development projects have stimulated demand for specialized knowledge of the social and cultural systems into which interventions are being proposed. Frequently anthropologists are called upon to predict both the immediate and long-term impact of such projects on the intended beneficiaries.

In many respects this shows evidence of renewed vigor in the sub-discipline of applied anthropology. The volume and variety of work undertaken are increasing, as donors' dissatisfaction grows with "top-down" interventionist approaches to rural development. Particularly in projects affecting smallholder agriculture, anthropologists are now asked to combine their efforts with those of economists, agronomists, engineers and others, during the identification and design phases of project development. When a project encounters serious obstacles in implementation, or collapses altogether, the donor or implementing agency may ask an anthropologist to find out what went wrong, and why. In general terms, the relevance of anthropological method and theory to the core issues of development is probably better understood now than ever before.

In their relationships with specific projects, however, anthropologists often find their roles narrowly defined. In theory, the final product of a design team will be a coherent, conceptually integrated project, yet such "teams" tend to be constituted ad hoc, with no prior history of collaboration and no guarantee whatever of smooth personal interaction or communication across disciplinary lines. In many cases the anthropologist ends up as the odd man out, waging -- in his own perception at least -- a rear-guard action against aspects of the proposed project that appear inappropriate, socially disruptive, or unethical. In some instances the anthropologist becomes involved at a later stage than other specialists, and is presented with a *fait accompli*, being asked only to analyze the "social soundness" issue (to employ a phrase now included in the AID approval process). This entails stating approval or disapproval of the project on the basis of its probable sociocultural impact. An assignment of this kind can be very frustrating if the anthropologist senses that nothing more is wanted than a "Good Housekeeping" seal of approval, and there is no real latitude for substantive redesign, even with a mediocre but salvageable project.

The situation does not necessarily improve when anthropologists are associated on a full- or part-time basis with project implementation teams. Integration of their expertise and findings into decisionmaking by project managers is difficult to achieve, especially when the latter have inherited a blueprint of scheduled activities and insist on adhering to it. Few large

rural development projects are structured in a way that permits mid-course adjustments: concrete suggestions stemming from on-going ethnographic fieldwork in the "target" community cannot be easily assimilated into centralized management systems.

For some, evaluation assignments offer greater professional satisfaction. In contrast to the rapid assessments required in project design, post-hoc evaluations of projects that have been terminated generally allow ample time for in-depth analysis. Often, though, the anthropologist carrying out such work concludes that major errors could have been avoided if only the original design had been better grounded in the ethnography of the affected community. Association with a single project, whether as a consultant or an independent researcher, limits the ability to apply lessons of this kind in other projects of a similar type.

For these reasons, among others, many anthropologists remain skeptical about the possibility of making significant impact on the content and quality of rural development projects. There appear to be relatively few examples of ongoing participation by anthropologists over the full cycle of a large-scale, long-term project. To illustrate the practical value of such involvement, the experience to date of the North Shaba Project merits closer examination.

PROJECT ORIGINATION AND DESIGN

Background and Preliminary Planning

The idea for an agricultural development project in North Shaba originated with Government of Zaire planners in the early 1970s. At that time, the mining areas of South Shaba, in Zaire's portion of the Copperbelt, were becoming increasingly dependent on maize imports from Zambia and Rhodesia. Neither of these countries appeared to be a dependable long-term source of imports. Yet rapid urbanization in South Shaba, together with a pronounced shift in consumption habits from manioc to maize, pushed demand for maize far above the level of domestic production. In the zones of Kongolo and Nyunzu in North Shaba -- designated in the colonial era as the "breadbasket" for the mining areas -- the volume of maize and other produce shipped south had fallen off sharply from the peak levels of the late 1950s.

North Shaba had been severely affected by civil conflict following the country's independence in 1960, and the process of economic decline had continued after hostilities ceased. The once excellent network of secondary roads and bridges had deteriorated, agricultural marketing activity had declined accordingly, and most farmers in the area lost their access to extension services and production inputs such as improved seed. In these circumstances, there was no capacity to sustain the pre-independence level of production, let alone surpass it so as to meet the growing demand in the South.

Nonetheless, its known potential and comparatively recent history as a cash-crop area made North Shaba the logical place for government initiatives in the agricultural sector. When these were first being considered, proposals for increasing maize production centered around compulsory resettlement of small farmers in large blocks of land suited to mechanized cultivation, with strong dependence on chemical fertilizers. The basic rationale was to replace "traditional" hand cultivation techniques with an entirely new system which was assumed to be many times more efficient. Existing government extension agents would be retrained and utilized in spreading the new technology.

Agricultural projects modelled along these lines were being established in several other areas of Zaire, as well as in some other African countries. The introduction of a uniform production package and the element of regimentation in the proposed *regroupement* of the rural population were characteristic of Zairian government policy. But the project that eventually took shape, following the government's decision to request financing from AID, bore almost no resemblance to this authoritarian model. It was transformed, as a result of a design process incorporating rapid reconnaissance techniques with ethnographic expertise on the project area, into an ambitious experiment in "bottom-up" development. As such it was anomalous in the context of contemporary Zaire, but its basic rationale made excellent sense in terms of both local needs and macro-level economic and political realities.

The Process Approach to Design

By 1975-76, when the design effort for the North Shaba Project took place, AID itself was reluctant (and, in certain respects, forbidden by Congress) to finance large, capital-intensive agricultural projects. The evidence from comparative research which the Agency itself supported (e.g., Morss et al., 1976) emphasized the need to incorporate a strong participatory content in small farmer development projects. This would entail considerable devolution of decisionmaking within each project, and an evolutionary, process-oriented approach towards defining and undertaking project activities. The North Shaba Project design was one of a series of assignments in which Development Alternatives, Inc. (DAI), attempted to apply the lessons of this comparative research (Mickelwait et al., 1978) in the context of an AID-funded rural development project.¹

The major elements of this approach, which was applied in the North Shaba Project, may be summarized as follows:

- Beginning project implementation slowly and on a small scale, to allow for gaining the knowledge needed in determining detailed project activities or to establish procedures for their determination as the project evolves.
- Explicit provision for flexibility during the implementation phase, in order to permit modification or redesign.

¹ The firm supplied the leader of the design team in each case, and usually one or more of the other members, under contract to AID.

- Inclusion of mechanisms to promote small farmer participation in decisionmaking, specifically regarding project activities.
- Specific attention to ways of eliciting small farmer resource commitment to project activities.
- Focus on increasing the planning capacity and economic viability of local organizations.
- Inclusion of an information system as an integral component to assess project impact, identify problems, and indicate appropriate modifications in the design.

Operationalizing these concepts depends to a great extent on project designers' ability to gain an understanding of the environment, broadly defined, in which the project must operate. Quasi-ethnographic methods can be used to good effect in rapid reconnaissance of a proposed project area as an isolated technique; this usually does not permit elaboration of a detailed project plan. When the existing information base is poorly developed, a year or more may be required for a pre-implementation phase that centers on intensive collection of economic, ecological and sociological data.

In the case of North Shaba, however, the design effort benefited from the participation of a husband-wife team of anthropologists¹ who had been conducting field research in the project area for the previous two years. They served as core members of the design team, led an extensive reconnaissance,

¹ Thomas and Pamela Blakely, Ph.D. candidates in anthropology at Northwestern and Indiana Universities, respectively. They have continued their research in the project area since the completion of the design, and recently (January-February 1979) served as consultants to the project during implementation; see following section.

encompassing visits to more than 100 villages over a three-week period, and wrote major portions of the eventual Project Paper submitted to AID. They therefore assumed a much broader role than the one usually occupied by anthropologists in rural development project design.

Specific Design Issues

There were three principal ways in which this type of ethnographic input directly influenced the project. Each of them deserves an extended discussion, and they can only be summarized here, in order to indicate the nature of the contributions that were made.

Generating Evidence to Support Redesign

The initial task, once the members of the design team had been assembled in the field, was to determine what model of agricultural development would be appropriate in the proposed project area. As noted, government preferences were for a mechanized project entailing compulsory resettlement of small farmers; at the interim stage when an AID team prepared a Project Review Paper¹ in late 1975, this issue had not been permanently laid to rest. A set of technical papers had been prepared, including a socio-cultural background study, but the description of the proposed project area was vague and in some instances inaccurate. No detail

¹ The Project Review Paper (PRP) was dropped from the AID project development cycle as of mid-1977. Formerly it constituted an intermediate step between initial identification of a potential project and final design.

was provided on the existing cropping systems, which vary widely within and between the two zones of Kongolo and Nyunzu. Except at a very general level, there was no analysis of the probable response and adaptation to a major project within the rural societies of North Shaba.

These deficiencies were remedied in the final design effort that produced the Project Paper in September 1976. In the detailed description of the project area, emphasis was placed on the heterogeneity of existing agricultural practices -- underlining the degree of spread between most and least productive farmers employing the same basic technology -- on the range of ecological adaptations found within the two zones, on farmers' demonstrated capacity to accept and adapt innovations, and on the vigor of decentralized sociopolitical structures. This evidence thus supported the argument for a project that would build on the strengths of existing social systems and production systems, rather than replacing them altogether. It also made a strong case for upgrading the types of intermediate technology already available, and introducing new prototypes only when they could be fabricated and maintained locally. The latter point was especially critical in view of Zaire's worsening economic situation, which threatened to delay or cut off the arrival of fertilizers, spare parts, fuel, etc., requiring foreign exchange. Taken as a whole, it documented the feasibility of a process-oriented project that would have a reasonable chance of sustaining its results, after a period of several years needed to attack

critical production, marketing and organizational constraints.

Focus on Project Content

During the writing of the Project Paper, a number of issues arose regarding the involvement of categories or groups in specific project activities. Most of the design team members recognized the need to tailor these activities as closely as possible to the needs of potential participants, but translating this principle into operational terms provoked some debate and disagreement. Here the anthropologists drew on their detailed ethnographic knowledge, and in some cases played an advocacy role on behalf of the intended "beneficiaries." Three examples will illustrate the process:

- Emphasis on the inadequacy of husband-wife information flow as a technique for transferring ideas and knowledge on agricultural practices. This led to the inclusion of activities expressly designed to deliver extension services to women, as well as men.
- Discussion of options by which the project could directly involve Pygmies, the majority of whom were working as casual laborers on "Bantu" (Baluba) maize farms in parts of Nyunzu zone: these included establishing secondary farm service centers in certain Pygmy villages, and special efforts to recruit Pygmy laborers for wage employment on labor-intensive road maintenance and rehabilitation.
- Insistence on the need to create incentives for local blacksmiths, whose skills would be upgraded by the project, to carry on their enterprises within their original villages, rather than resettling in Kongolo or other urban centers.

In addition to these issues, major debate and disagreement arose over the handling of data collection activities by the project. An "information system," or project monitoring and evaluation unit, had been designated as one of the key subsystems of the project. Here the anthropologists made a powerful argument on the need to ensure privacy and protection for cooperating farmers: they were able to document the fact that "information" on economic activities was almost universally misused and abused by government *agronomes* working in the project area. They contended that the project must move cautiously, and avoid undertaking a large-sample baseline survey: to ensure farmers' cooperation and quality in the data that would be gathered, this project activity would have to be drastically different from all that had gone before. Their views and preferences had to be reconciled with the requirements of both USAID/Zaire and the Government of Zaire for hard data on project performance and impact. It was certain, too, that as implementation proceeded, information needs would escalate rapidly within the project itself. The discussion of this issue in the Project Paper reflects a compromise: assurances were given that rigorous coding procedures would be used in the collection of data both on individual farmers and (when needed) on particular villages.

Guidelines for Implementation

A third dimension of the anthropological contribution to project design consisted of guidance on methods for actually making the project work. The entire Project Paper, in theory, should

serve this function, but examples abound in which project implementers have virtually thrown away a design and started fresh. They do so because they find little or no information on the "hows" and "whys" of implementation or because there is nothing to prepare them for interacting successfully with the community in which the project operates.

The North Shaba Project Paper contains extensive annex material (in addition to a long text) specifically directed at this problem. Two of the annexes are of special interest:

- One consists of a catalogue of possible pitfalls, misunderstandings and misperceptions that could be anticipated in advance of implementation: this focuses on local expectations regarding expatriate technicians, behavior patterns and role models prevalent among Zairian government staff, sociological and cultural carryovers from the Belgian colonial era that might impinge on the project, and related questions.
- A second annex contains a lengthy discussion on the selection of secondary farm service centers: a total of 75 had been estimated as necessary to cover the whole project area, and 57 potential sites were named and the reasons for selection were explained. Local informants assisted in preparing this annex, and emphasized the need to consider such questions as patriline balance, traditional rivalries between villages and between and larger political units (the *collectivités*) in the Bahemba areas, and inter-ethnic (Baluba-Pygmy) relationships in Nyunzu. The pros and cons of several compromise selections were also explained in detail.

Guidelines of this kind, while not providing a blueprint of every activity to be undertaken, offered a useful resource, both in forward planning for implementation, and as a reference

to be consulted as specific problems were encountered. They supplemented the overall argument made on behalf of the project, without disguising its experimental nature and the very real risk of error inherent in a complex development effort.

INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCE

The Project Paper for North Shaba was submitted to AID in early September 1976, and was approved in uncharacteristically rapid fashion. AID's Project Agreement with the Government of Zaire was signed on the last day of the month (not coincidentally, also the last day of the Agency's fiscal year). This signalled the official start of the project, but the technical assistance team¹ did not arrive in the country until nine and a half months later, and most project components did not become operational until early 1978. Serious logistical difficulties accounted for much of this delay; somewhat surprisingly, the host country government responded more quickly than AID in committing resources and staff to the project.

Since mid-1978, the pace of implementation has begun to accelerate quite rapidly, and it is no longer possible to summarize the status of all project activities in a few paragraphs. Recently, though, the government's worsening financial situation has (for the first time) delayed the arrival of funds committed to the North Shaba Project. Continuation of GOZ support cannot be taken for granted, although USAID/Zaire has been pressing to have the

¹ DAI was selected as the contractor through competitive bidding.

funds released, and the project is accorded top priority -- it is one of a few projects that are actually functioning -- by the GOZ Department of Agriculture. Predictions are hazardous, because the project is obviously vulnerable to external factors that are beyond its control.

Within the domain that project staff and participants can influence, however, there is evidence that the basic framework of the design remains applicable. More specifically, the ethnographic foundation of that design continues to make sense in terms of the activities that directly involve the area's small farmer population.

Developing Staff Capabilities

To cite one example, the cadre of Zairian staff nominated by the GOZ Department of Agriculture to head up most of the project sub-systems were young and inexperienced. All came from other regions of the country, and none had any familiarity with the development philosophy embodied in the project (predictably so, since it departed so sharply from previous practice in Zairian agriculture). To prepare them for their roles as decisionmakers controlling and allocating project resources, time was devoted first to intensive study of the Project Paper, and then to an extended reconnaissance of the project area, retracing many of the design team's steps from a year and a half earlier. Here fundamentals of ethnographic field methods came into play: the advisory team helped to generate a set of data points to be pursued during village visits by

three-person groups (usually one American and two Zairians), and explained the concept of participant observation and ways of applying it.

This exercise took place over a six-week period, and covered those portions of the project area where secondary farm centers might conceivably be established in the first or second year. The results exceeded expectations: not only did the reconnaissance lead to fairly detailed written reports on each village and sector visited, but it provided the occasion for spirited dialogue-- verging in some cases on encounter sessions -- between spokesmen for local communities and for the project, respectively. This served to drive home a major theme in the training process, which was the necessity of listening to what small farmers had to say, and of sustaining a two-way process of communication. These concepts only became meaningful when concrete examples were at hand, and the cadre of staff were made aware of their own lack of useful knowledge about the project area.

To a large extent, this initial experience has set a precedent for the training of middle- and lower-ranking project staff who have been subsequently employed. Their training has been planned and administered almost exclusively by the Zairian subsystem chiefs, and reconnaissance is seen as an ongoing activity: in other words, every trip through the project area (most are spread over several days, and involve stays of one

or more nights in agricultural centers or neighboring villages) is treated as an occasion to add to the knowledge of economic, ecological and sociocultural characteristics in the project environment.

Although not involved in the design effort, I have worked with the project during three assignments (totalling three months) over the past year. The first of these coincided with the training of the subsystem chiefs and their first exposure to the project area. My role was not to provide specific information on the project area itself, but rather to assist with introducing a methodology that would hopefully guide the substantive work of the various subsystems. Here I was able to draw on cumulative/experience of fieldwork in several different situations; dissertation research over 18 months in western Kenya had been supplemented by shorter assignments in seven other countries.

In this work, a comparative framework (not strictly ethnological in an academic sense) proved extremely useful in helping to determine what questions were fundamental in relation to decisionmaking within the project. Knowledge of French and Swahili provided good access both to project staff and to farmer spokesmen and village leaders. This proved especially valuable in my first visit, when most of the key Zairian staff were still relatively unfamiliar with Swahili.

¹ The Swahili spoken in Shaba region and elsewhere in eastern Zaire is far less polished and poorer in vocabulary than the Kiswahili spoken in Tanzania and along the east coast of Africa.

Building an Information System

The project monitoring and evaluation subsystem has been my main area of concentration during more recent visits. The design and testing of village- and farm-level data collection documents was carried out by means of consultation within the project (between staff of different subsystems) and also by sounding out farmers and village elders. With a view to establishing confidence, the recording of data on the *fiche du village* is meant to be done jointly by the project extensionist assigned to the village, and literate village representatives (with verbal participation by others). One copy, in Swahili, should then remain in the village, while copies in French are used by the extensionist and in the subsystem offices. This *fiche* is intended to serve as a permanent record of village characteristics and activities, with different categories of information being updated on a monthly, seasonal or yearly basis as needed.

A parallel effort is now underway to develop a system of farm records with a sample of individual farmers. The basic document is a small notebook in which the extensionist and members of the household record weekly observations, along with certain physical measurements on plant density, field size, and other variables.

This *fiche* also remains at the source, and data from it are coded before being removed to the project offices for quantitative analysis. These procedures not only serve to protect privacy, but also permit use of the document as an extension tool, since it remains on the farm as a detailed record of inputs and outputs over each crop cycle.

The emphasis during the first year of these activities has been on the collection process, and on the quality of data being gathered. The process has relied principally on young extensionists (agricultural high school graduates) who were recruited by the project and assigned to proposed secondary farm centers: 17 were designated in the first year. They are assisted by three full-time data collectors, who work directly within the monitoring and evaluation subsystem. The extensionists are the main point of contact between the project and local farmers. They have multiple responsibilities, encompassing not only extension and data gathering, but sale and distribution of farm implements, and liaison with the farmer councils that the project has begun to promote as the first step toward possible precooperatives or cooperatives.

Further Contributions

Early in 1979 the two ethnographers who had worked on the North Shaba Project design were engaged as short-term consultants to the project. Although they had continued to reside in the project area during the intervening period, they had

not been affiliated in any way with the project. Their vantage point in observing its activities was a village situated very near one of the 17 secondary farm centers. At first, there was some confusion and anxiety on the part of project staff, who were uncertain whether the anthropologists were responsible for formally evaluating the project (they were not), since a scheduled evaluation by AID had been postponed more than once. Once their position, as a resource on whom the project could draw to tackle specific issues and problems that had arisen, had been clarified, a more productive working relationship began to develop.

Although written reports on this work are not yet available, significant contributions were made in at least three areas:

- Assessment of the data collection efforts underway at the farm and village levels, including improvements in the functional Swahili translation of the documents, and appraisal of the degree to which the content and purpose are understood by participating farmers;
- A series of in-depth case studies on a sample of the six secondary farm centers, giving specific recommendations for future project activities at each center, and drawing generalizable lessons for application elsewhere; and
- Providing ideas and suggestions regarding the physical facilities to be built (by the project) at the center for research and farmer training. This process of discussion led to a decision to build clusters of small buildings, rather than a large dormitory, to house farmers who would come there for courses. This, in turn, enormously enhanced the prospects of accommodating women (who could accompany and cook for their husbands) and involving them in activities at the center.

Following a fieldwork period of several weeks, the findings and recommendations have been shared with project staff, in group discussions and in the form of written reports. Future consultancy arrangements with the same husband-wife team of anthropologists can be funded under the AID technical assistance contract, if the project staff request such assistance.

CONCLUSION

Anthropologists rarely have the opportunity to participate as extensively in a rural development project as they have been able to do in Project North Shaba. In comparison, most of the assignments they undertake allow little latitude for shaping project content or influencing the process of decisionmaking. It is too early to draw meaningful conclusions about the impact of Project North Shaba, let alone attribute any such impact to specific anthropological inputs. The experience thus far indicates how many of the classical errors that recur in major projects can be avoided in a flexible, process-oriented approach to project development.

It is useful to summarize the conditions under which these contributions have occurred, in order to suggest how similar arrangements might be made in future projects:

- Ethnographic expertise on the project area and its population, from two anthropologists with current

experience, language skills, and a commitment of equitable, participatory development;

- A comparative framework provided by another anthropologist, with field experience in several different settings, who was able to complement the skills of the ethnographers while working on a more direct basis with project staff;
- Acceptance of the development approach, with its strong orientation towards process, on the part of AID officials responsible for the project, and the members of the design and implementation teams hired by AID; and
- Host country government willingness to experiment with a novel approach in a single project, and the assignment of capable but inexperienced technicians who were willing to absorb and apply new ideas.

In terms of professional opportunities for applied anthropologists, the participation of different individuals in the first two functions is unlikely to occur very often. Yet if ethnographic skills are not complemented by a comparative framework, they cannot be used optimally in the process of project development. On the other hand, fairly rapid project development without a sound ethnographic foundation also poses serious risks. In most situations, anthropologists must be prepared to take on both of these roles, if they seriously expect to influence project design and implementation.

Regarding the third element, North Shaba is not an isolated case: there is reason to believe that AID is far more sympathetic than other large donors (the World Bank being a prime example) to the process-oriented approach outlined here, when

contractor teams can make a coherent argument for it. As for the host country setting, the peculiar circumstances of Zaire made North Shaba a fascinating test case. In certain respects, it offers exceptional latitude for trying out a novel approach; in other respects, of course, the obstacles are so great that virtually any positive results achieved there will be worthy of close scrutiny, by all who are concerned with promoting rural development in sub-Saharan Africa.

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