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COMMENT

Rural Resources in Africa: Development from below needed

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Insufficient attention has been given to the impact of development projects on traditional societies in rural Africa and other parts of the Third World – and this in spite of the great interest which has in recent years been shown in the analysis, management and development of local resources. What is now needed is development from below, instead of the traditional development from above which all too often has continued after the end of the colonial period. Development involves a highly complex interaction of physical and human variables in a variety of social, cultural and political milieux. The complexity and dynamism of resource systems must be understood if the implications of the introduction of new techniques and technologies are to be fully evaluated.

Land as Basic Resource

Rural Africa is presently experiencing major problems of development and in certain countries there are already signs of severe stress. Since the onset of colonialism, indigenous resource systems have been forced to adapt to changing circumstances initiated by widespread social, economic and political transformation, and in some cases these systems have been unable to keep pace with such change. Throughout history, rural Africa's basic resource, land, has been in plentiful supply, whilst human labour has at times been insufficient for the utilisation of natural resources. Traditionally, land is owned communally, with overall control vested in a chief. Community members utilise which areas they wish, and until recently the buying and selling of land was largely unknown to many African peoples.

Traditional Cultivation

Food production is carefully adapted to social and environmental factors with the principal aims of meeting subsistence requirements, fulfilling village and tribal obligations and possibly marketing a surplus, whilst at the same time maintaining the quality of the soil. Declining yields signal to the farmer the need to move to a new area, preferably where dense forest vegetation is indicative of fertile soils. Such a system of shifting cultivation is, however, dependent on a plentiful supply of land if fallow periods of 20 or more years are to be maintained. Traditional farming systems have shown a variety of adaptations where good farmland is scarce, utilising more intensive techniques such as mounding, ridging, intercropping, crop successions, terracing and the addition of organic fertilizer.

Traditional Pastoralism

The other major traditional livelihood-resource system in rural Africa is pastoralism, which displays an equally careful adaptation to social and environmental factors. As with the cultivators, perhaps more so with the herders, mobility was, and still is, a key element in their way of life. Migration occurs in response to the availability of pasture and water in marginal lands where drought is an ever-present threat. Recent research has shown pastoralism to be more efficient ecologically than commercial ranching, or even wild animals; this is so because of the degree of mobility, the diversity of species, the high stocking rates and the high rates of reproduction due to the large numbers of females in the herds.

These two main livelihood–resource systems seem to be well adapted to environmental and other factors, and are capable of responding to changes over time and space. Why then is rural Africa presently experiencing stress, and why are living standards not generally improving? One has to examine the historical dimension to see that during the colonial and postcolonial periods, indigenous resource systems experienced pressures of a different character and magnitude, such that they were often unable to adapt and maintain a state of equilibrium without deterioration of basic resources. The colonial period saw the introduction of new attitudes to land use, with increasing export-crop production and a reduction in the incentives to grow food crops and in the amount of land used for this purpose. The development of cash crops and the introduction of taxation encouraged people, mainly young males, to leave their villages for work in estates, plantations, mines and towns. Western styles of education emphasised the virtues and vitality of urban life to the detriment of the rural areas. Western medical advances brought more rapid population growth and greater competition for farmland. Veterinary innovations improved herd quality, but meant that more animals had to be fed and watered on rangelands which had been reduced through the alienation of land and the encroachment of cultivated areas.

Colonial Changes

With the alienation of land for cash crop production and European settlement, together with the introduction of individual tenure and the buying and selling of land, traditional pastoralism and cultivation became constrained territorially, and mobility, which is such an important feature of these systems, was restricted. During the colonial period African economies were gradually incorporated into the world trading system, making producers vulnerable to decisions and pricing policies formulated many thousands of miles away. The management of their resources was frequently taken out of indigenous hands, tensions were created and the equilibrium upset in such a way that degradation of the land resource became more likely.

Equilibrium Upset

Since World War II, many schemes have been devised in an attempt to deal with the stresses and problems of rural Africa, but living standards have scarcely improved and prospects for the future are not encouraging. Rural development projects have suffered from two major limitations: firstly, an unwillingness to treat the rural poor as the main priority in development programmes, and secondly, a basic ignorance of indigenous rural resources and their potential for future development. A major problem has been that much of the decision making about rural development is undertaken in the urban areas, usually the capital cities, by educated, town-born individuals who have taken over from expatriate colonial administrators and who have little empathy with the people and problems of the rural areas. Politicians show much more concern for the better organised urban populations who are seen as a greater potential threat to political stability than those in the rural areas, who must be content to receive poor prices for the foodstuffs destined for urban markets.

Present Problems

Until recently, rural development programmes have followed a 'development from above' approach, in which farmers and pastoralists are told what is best for them and little interest is shown in the functioning of indigenous resource systems. Development agencies and personnel have failed to appreciate such aspects as the farmers' attitudes to soil conservation, their detailed knowledge of flora and fauna, pastoralists' responses to drought, and seasonality, which is such a dominant feature of tropical African livelihood resource systems. Too often in the past, separate features of a particular resource system have been singled out for improvement, without recognition of the repercussions this might have throughout the

Development from Above

entire system. What is needed is an holistic approach at the local level, which identifies the components of resource systems and the complex interdisciplinary linkages between them.

Development from
Below

'Development from above' strategies, with their dictatorial approach to rural development planning, must give way to a more democratic 'development from below', where measures are adapted to existing systems, rather than designed to achieve a complete transformation with all the environmental and social stresses that this might generate. An increasing amount of interest in this new approach is now being shown, but it could still be a long time before such policies are implemented by governments and before the people of rural Africa experience a real improvement in their living standards.

This Comment is a shortened version of the author's Lyell Lecture, delivered at the Annual Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at the University of Sussex on 24 August 1983.

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