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SOCIAL ANALYSIS AND THE DYNAMICS OF ADVOCACY
IN DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

In 1975 the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), the principal administrative agent for American bilateral development assistance, mandated a social analysis component to the project preparation and approval process.¹ Although "social soundness analysis" is now a required dimension of project identification and design its presumed positive effects are not yet apparent on the output side. Post project impact evaluations reveal that there continue to be negative social effects from AID's development efforts, regardless of project type. Why?

In the process by which projects are identified, framed, approved, and ultimately implemented, important signals identified by pre-project social analysis get displaced. This occurs because anticipating social impact is only one of several goals or functions served by pre-project design analysis. This essay interprets the role of social analysis in the dynamics of project preparation, identifying structures and procedures which attenuate its influence.

THE PROBLEM

An examination of the Agency's own project impact evaluation reports shows a recurrent pattern of negative social effects, both during implementation and after completion. A few comments will illustrate:

On rural roads in Liberia:

"...Though the projects intended to strengthen the capability of local contractors, this has generally not happened...In addition, as the market value of the land for...cash enterprises (crops, lumbering, mineral exploitation) has increased, competition for the land and its resources has sharpened. Small farmers who have

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traditionally farmed the land are the first to lose rights to it..." (AID, 1980a: 18)

On small scale irrigation in the Philippines:

"...the Philippine government has not focused on the debt burdens of the farmers, but rather on increased rice production...Farmers will be unable to pay back loans to Irrigation Service Associations that, in turn, will be unable to repay the government. As farmers fall into debt, it will be harder to borrow money for fertilizer, good seeds, and pesticides. This could lead to a decline in productivity...The social and political implications of such deterioration could be momentous." (AID, 1980b: 8)

On rural water supplies in Kenya:

"...No one consults the community before building the system to find out what the users want in the way of individual connections or Communal Water Points (CEPs) so there is no basis for designing the system to meet the needs of the community. Indeed, CWPs are usually located to discourage their use...CWPs are closed to encourage users to pay for individual service...The cost of installing individual service is subsidized to encourage use yet the bureaucratic procedures required to get a connection discourage potential users...(moreover) funds are not available for the portion of the cost subsidized by the Ministry of Water Development..." (AID, 1980c: 16-17)

On village level health dispensaries in Senegal:

"...One third of the (health) Huts in Nioko Department, where most had been open for the longest time (about 9 months) had already closed...It was difficult to face... community elders. Their interest in and concern about village health had been demonstrated by their building of the Hut. They told us, with some pride, of communal labor by the village youth and their money contributions to buy doors, paint, extra cement and iron sheets for the roof. They were confused and frustrated because many Huts had closed. If Huts continue to close, as seems probable, the main impact of the project may well be the frustrated expectations of some 800,000 villagers." (AID, 1980d: ii, 12)

It must be noted that most USAID projects are not comprehensive failures, nor is the social impact always negative.² Although these illustrations are more indicative than selective of Agency experience, there are many aspects of project implementation beyond the control of the Agency. Contractors fail

to live up to their commitments, recipient country governments prove to be less committed to certain social aspects of a project than the AID field mission was led to believe, and so on.

What concerns us here are the internal, organizational reasons for the frequency of negative social consequences in the 1980s, particularly some years after the Agency has institutionalized social analysis as part of project design. Why, after thirty years of development assistance, is AID still underwriting the construction of roads which have the effect of displacing the rural poor from their land? Why does AID support water development projects in which the public to be served is ignored? What is the point of raising expectations among 800,000 people in remote areas about the availability of health services when even a modest number of installations cannot be sustained? Assuming this is not by design, where is the organizational learning in development assistance?

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SOCIAL ANALYSIS AND PROJECT DESIGN

In 1975 AID specified guidelines for conducting "social soundness analyses" of potential projects (AID, 1975: 5A-1). Three areas of inquiry are to be examined for each prospective project: sociocultural feasibility, potential spread effect, and social impact, or distribution of benefits and burdens among different groups. Sociocultural feasibility requires an examination of local values, beliefs, social structure and organization in order to determine the compatibility of the project with perceptions and practices of the target population. Spread effect refers to "the likelihood that the new practices or institutions introduced among the initial project target population will be diffused among other groups" (Ibid). Social impact assessment requires the identification of groups which would be positively affected by a project, those adversely affected, and in what ways. Participation of the target

population in all phases of the project--from identification through implementation--is also to be specified.

This is an abbreviated version of the guidelines. They take up twelve single-spaced pages in the Project Assistance Handbook. One could infer that the scope and depth of the social analyses are to be more substantial than cursory. In practice that has proven to be somewhat at odds with the way the findings are presented and the proviso that "the data should be possible to obtain in two to three weeks" (5A-12).³

How is social soundness analysis reflected in the project preparation and approval process? In the case of the most preliminary stage of project development, the Project Identification Document (PID), the social analysis is essentially presented as a set of questions which are to be answered in a subsequent field analysis done for the final project design, the so-called Project Paper (PP). At the identification (PID) stage questions which should relate to the specific project are general and predictable. The social soundness analysis in a PID might therefore be one page, noting that, e.g., relationships between government officials and the campesinos will be described; methods of communication and decision making among agricultural sector officials with regard to implementation will be identified; the impact of the agricultural technology of the project on women will be described; etc.

The actual social analysis is supposed to be done as part of the Project Paper design team activity where one team member is the designated social analyst. Depending on the nature of the project the social analyst might be an anthropologist, a sociologist or some other behavioral scientist. The social analyst might be contracted as part of the design team, or separately.

In the final PP a summary of the social analysis takes up three to five pages. It is included in a section along with the other sub-project analyses:

e.g., technical analysis, institutional analysis, economic analysis, financial analysis, and environmental analysis. The full text is to be included in an appendix, along with the full narratives of the other analyses.

The writing of the first draft of the PP may be a joint effort among the members of the design team. It is also not uncommon for one member of the design team to integrate the rough drafts of the respective separate analyses into a single draft narrative. Usually the team leader takes this responsibility unless another of the analysts proves to be a more able and willing writer. Thus the social analysis, as with any other separate analytic component, might be well presented and balanced with the other analyses or not, depending on who does the writing.

Moreover, the final packaging of a PP for the review and approval process in Washington is done by a design officer in the AID field mission. The design officer has considerable discretion. He (rarely she) edits, synthesizes and summarizes large parts of various analyses in order to make the overall PP narrative succinct, balanced and complete in terms of the Agency's format and statutory requirements.

SOME ANALYSES ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS⁴

Only 25% of those projects examined in a recent review of social analysis in AID's project design were influenced by the social analysis component (Ingersoll, 1981: 2). There are a number of practices which diminish the value and influence of social soundness analysis in AID's project preparation. The Ingersoll study is helpful in identifying the variable quality of the social analyses themselves. Many social analysts do not critique the basic goals, assumptions or logic of the project (62). They tend to emphasize benefits more than ascertain the costs of project effects (36). There is no standard format for writing the social analysis (55).

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Often the social analyst does not interact with the technical analysts sufficiently to afford an integrated, comprehensive perspective. This has resulted in the social component standing alone in the project summary; it does not appear to inform, or be informed by, the other analyses. It has been observed that the social analyst is often called in only after the major features of a project have already been determined (Ingersoll, 1981: 51). This might reflect scheduling problems. It also suggests an attitude about priorities among the respective types of analysis on the part of the AID field mission staff or the regional bureau in Washington recruiting the design team. As with environmental impact analysis, there is sometimes a last minute, perfunctory quality to the social analysis (Morgan, 1980: 5).

Qualifiers and caveats included in the full narrative of a social soundness analysis are sometimes missing in the PP summary. The discretion accorded design officers in editing and balancing the final PP submission is thus a two edged sword: it guarantees a succinct, spare document. It can also obscure potentially important project deficiencies.⁵ The Ingersoll study reported that AID mission staff and design team leaders respond more positively to social analysis when it reinforces the positive aspects or probabilities of success of a project than when it reveals doubts about potential social impact (1981: 45).

Other indicators of design team dynamics suggest an implicit hierarchy of analyses for the mission submitting the PP. Veteran technicians, whether AID personnel or outside consultants, are most likely to be the leaders of design teams. Prejudice is sometimes manifest in attitudes toward social scientists, especially anthropologists, by veteran field technicians. Anthropologists are perceived by some as naysayers when it comes to the effects of social change on traditional cultures. They are accused of emphasizing

the negative, rather than positive, effects. Moreover, field people want the social analyst to tell them on the spot what incremental adjustments in the project design would mitigate a possible negative effect (rather than reconsider the project in any fundamental sense). If the social analyst cannot give a firm recommendation, field staff become frustrated.

Insofar as many anthropologists are women, they report a residual sexism in which the social analyst is not made to feel a full member of the team. Condescension or a reluctant tolerance of the female analyst whose contribution must be included sometimes characterizes team relationships. Although the trend is still impressionistic, this effect appears to be mitigated where the anthropologist is an internal Agency specialist as opposed to a temporary outside consultant (Ingersoll, 1981: 57).

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AS ADVOCACY

However, there are more fundamental reasons why social analysis gets displaced in project preparation. It is necessary to look at the purposes which are served by the preparation and approval process. Analysis for better "design" of projects is only one purpose, although it is the most manifest. The various analytic components of project preparation also serve the purpose of advocacy. In fact, the multi-stage project development procedure is essentially an advocacy process, inextricably tied to internal Agency dynamics between the field mission and Washington headquarters.

The AID field mission formulates projects which are many months, frequently several years, in preparation. Project ideas and proposals are the product of some synthesis of overall American aid policy objectives and the development plans and objectives of the recipient government worked out over time, albeit sometimes discontinuously due to changes in government on both sides. By the time a project gets to the PP stage, the recipient government

knows about it, and has already invested enough time and other local resources to have a stake in it. In sum, Project Papers in particular already represent a de facto commitment. Therefore the AID mission director, because of local pressures, is interested in expediting the review and approval process to whatever extent possible.

Project preparation also represents commitments of money. For Agency, especially mission, planning purposes a project is earmarked for a given fiscal year. If projects are held up in the approval process because of doubts reflected in the various analyses, moving large amounts of money through the pipeline is interrupted. This can negatively affect Washington's perception of the mission as an efficient programmer of Agency funds. This can be crucial to the mission's future credibility in securing funds to execute the program proposed in its annual budget submissions.⁶

The mission director's mobility within the Agency, and that of his immediate staff, depends upon his/her productivity in terms of project approvals, pipeline commitments and projects visible in the state of actual implementation. Mission directors and mission staff are rotated frequently enough that most are not around when project impact evaluations are done. Certainly there are interim evaluations which might reflect badly on a mission staff if projects are not going well. However, by and large, organizational output for mission staff tends to be defined more in terms of moving projects to the implementation stage than in successful project performance or outcomes.

Consequently mission staffs are project advocates; it is in their interest to get projects approved and show movement to both the government of the country in which they are located and to Washington. The incentive is to promote the sound aspects of proposed projects, not risk delays in project approval with emphasis on caveats turned up in the social analysis.

In Washington the AID bureaucracy also wants to be perceived as facilitating project development, not inhibiting it. It is important not to be the bottleneck in what is already a lengthy process. Therefore, the respective regional bureaus (Asia, Africa, Latin America, Near East) also have an interest in moving money. The rate of spending affects funding levels from year to year from bureau to bureau.

As a large, complex organization AID experiences the usual tensions between field operations and headquarters. Each locus has a different scope of responsibilities. Washington has overall responsibility for approval and oversight; at the same time, the regional bureaus are to support and backstop field operations. The horizons of field missions are more narrow. In the relations between Washington and the field it must be remembered that the mission is an island of considerable authority. If the signals are clear from the field that a mission director wants a particular project, he will usually get it approved. Delays in approval result in complicated and sometimes fractious cable exchanges which delay the start-up much longer.

This is not to say that project review panels in Washington are casual and uncaring about the quality of the analysis presented in the PPs. However the workload is such that not every criterion of the elaborate PP can be evaluated with equal weight. Reviews will also vary with the technical skills and special competencies of those who make up the review panel for any given project or set of projects. Consequently the accountability for the cash flows usually ends up being the most carefully considered. The social analysis might raise red flags to the careful reader even if they have been softened, but that may not provide cause for holding up approval if the technical analyses are judged to be adequate.

The upshot of the advocacy function of project preparation and approval is "overdesign," both in terms of pre-programming and optimism. Pre-programming,

or "pre-mature programming," as a type of overdesign refers to confident statements about the distribution of benefits, economic return, positive institutional outcomes, replicability, sustainability, all supported by detailed implementation schedules, as if the uncertainty characterizing any development activity had been accounted for in advance planning.⁷

To the extent that the advocacy purpose of project development is well served by the positive impression conveyed in quantitative measures of inputs delivered, return on investment, numbers of beneficiaries in the target population and so forth, social analysis is at a disadvantage. Sociological, anthropological observations which point to potentially negative impacts through verbal, impressionistic narratives cannot compete with the seemingly scientifically grounded economic and technical analyses, however false the latter may prove to be. Doubts which cannot be conveyed with the same aura of empirical evidence get downplayed almost by default in a contest where confidence exudes from numbers.

Thus, as used by those promoting the project, the design criteria themselves have the effect of substituting aspiration for probability very early in the game. Projects are approved on the basis of the confident estimates presented along a range of output criteria many of which, in the course of implementation, prove faulty. The Agency's own evaluation teams have observed: "AID analysis in project papers has been overly and unnecessarily optimistic and has resulted in unrealistic expectations for performance..." (AID, 1980b: 11).

THE FUTURE

Is there any prospect that social analysis will get better, or be better used in the Reagan administration? Can we anticipate changes which might reflect Agency learning and which in turn result in more positive social impacts?

The Ingersoll study offers useful suggestions on how social analysis might be improved through revised guidelines (1981: Appendix 1). It also provides a thoughtful framework whereby the social analysis component of a project should be evaluated in the Washington-based review exercise (1981: Appendix 2). As the study revealed a lack of consensus and consistency in the preparation of, as well as in the evaluation of, social analysis, the recommendations are based on a reasonable assumption that a certain amount of standardization of format and procedure will be at least modestly helpful.

However, to the extent that advocacy remains a function of project development it is unlikely that social analysis will play a more influential role than it presently does. Precisely because advocacy is an implicit or latent function of project preparation and review, rather than explicit, altering that fact is not readily subject to revised guidelines or exhortation by memorandum. As we have seen, the advocacy purpose of project development derives from the incentive structures that move mission staff, the consultants they engage, and certain elements within the central bureaucracy. Therefore unless the incentives which motivate Agency personnel are changed, a more objective application of design criteria is unlikely.

To be sure AID has begun to place more emphasis on implementation and evaluation, as opposed to front-end planning, in recent years. A state-of-the art review of the literature on "implementation" was commissioned in 1979 (Ingle). Implementation and evaluation are receiving substantially more attention in the Agency's in-house training activities. One of the most effective and thoughtful of Agency contractors has urged the substitution of a "development benefits delivered" incentive for the current "funds obligated" incentive (Mickelwait, et al., 1979: 230). This implies a greater concern with the long run consequences of projects (1981: 43). Accordingly, the new

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AID Administrator has said the impact evaluation program will continue (AID, 1981: 1).

From this we might infer a gradual shift of informal signals to mission staff that collectively form their incentive structure. Doing "more with less," a slogan now frequently heard in the Agency, might mean that more emphasis will be placed on project outcomes. This could over time supplant the present incentives to move money at the expense of socially desirable consequences.

At the same time the Administrator has said some things about changes in emphasis which are less encouraging. A recurrent theme in AID under a Reagan Administration is the same as that propagated in domestic policy: economic efficiency is a value to be reasserted. The AID Administrator has noted that the Agency will emphasize activities with direct results for increased productivity and incomes (AID, 1981: 1). Economic feasibility tests will be more rigorous, i.e., more attention will be paid to the internal rate of return on investment when assessing potential projects. Emphasis will be on the "lowest cost solutions" to the greatest number of beneficiaries. In terms of Agency personnel, and by extension Agency incentives, this will mean more technical and professional expertise in macro and micro economic analysis.

Consequently the slogan "doing more with less" could mean giving even more weight to technical analysis in project development, leaving social analysis at an even greater disadvantage. The Administrator has said that issues of equity and distribution will not be abandoned in Agency programming under his tenure. However unless Agency procedures are changed in ways which downplay the advocacy function of project analysis, and substitute overall quality for quantity, reorganizing and changing guidelines for social analysis will prove cosmetic. So long as the present reward system remains in tact, the impact evaluations will continue to report negative effects.

Progress in social problem-solving requires some combination of formal, technical knowledge and the "ordinary" knowledge which reposes in the community with the problem.⁸ Formally packaged information and analysis are most useful when they interact with socially derived knowledge (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979). Parameters of AID programming such as participation, decentralization, environmental impact and social soundness are indicative of Agency learning to the extent that they reflect tentative attempts to interactively capture local knowledge. If agriculture, rural development, nutrition and population programs are to remain the "centerpiece" of Agency policy as the Administrator has said, social analysis must be central to project formulation and implementation. Good social analysis is probably the most interactive of all the analytic components involved in project development.

Re-establishing a rationalist (as opposed to interactive, incrementalist) approach to Agency programming would be regressive on any organizational learning curve where social change is an objective. Our analysis suggests that upgrading technical, economic analysis is likely to have an effect opposite to that intended. What is required is a posture of "doing less with more," where "less" refers to the number of projects and countries of activity and "more" means not more money, but money more concentrated on experimental ventures to enhance Agency learning and improve future prospects for positive social, as well as productivity, outcomes.

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Notes

- * The author is grateful for cooperation received from many AID officials and the opportunity to learn Agency procedures while directing a Cooperative Agreement between AID and The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration.
- 1. "Development assistance" as used in this essay refers to concessional lending, grants and technical assistance. In AID nomenclature, "impact evaluation" is an ex post procedure which examines performance and impact along a range of criteria, one of which is social. "Social soundness analysis" is ex ante, along with economic, financial, and technical analyses which, collectively, inform project design.
- 2. The candor of these evaluations suggests that, whatever the reasons for the recurrent, unanticipated social consequences of many projects, people within AID would like to do better. This must be acknowledged because the publication of negative findings cannot help the Agency in its annual requests for appropriations from a reluctant Congress.
- 3. The guidelines are currently being revised.
- 4. The analysis which follows is based on the author's experience in managing a contract with AID for a professional society, discussions with AID officials both in Washington and in the field, and the examination of project documents. In addition, the analysis is informed by a just completed study by J. Ingersoll, M. Sullivan and B. Lenkerd on "Social Analysis of AID Projects: A Review of the Experience," for the Agency's Office of Policy and Program Coordination, June, 1981, in which 48 sets of project documents were examined and interviews held with 35 "producers and consumers of social soundness analyses in AID," p. 1 of draft manuscript.
- 5. A member of the design team for an agricultural services delivery project in Ghana reported that the PP did not have a social analysis section when it was first submitted. Later, during the actual review a social analysis was included, but certain of the awkward and critical statements about the project were missing. Ingersoll (1981: 41) also reports such occurrences as well as pressures applied to social analysts by mission staff or other team members to soften or alter their criticism about potential social impact.
- 6. The bureaucratic effects of programming large amounts of money through a development agency are well described by Tendler (1975).
- 7. There is an ample literature on this phenomenon as it relates to decision-making in complex organizations. It begins in the 1950s with James Thompson and is applied to development organizations in the 1960s and '70s by Martin Landau, William J. Siffin, and Russell Stout, Jr. The most comprehensive bibliography can be found in Stout, 1980.
- 8. The work of David C. Korten is an excellent start (1980).

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