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THE POLITICAL ASPECTS OF INDUCING CHANGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

by
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I have some ideas that may give some food for thought; some ideas that have given results in another country. And while I know that nothing can be transferred entirely from one country to another, there may be some aspects that suggest what can be done here. I have to admit my biases and as an economist; I have to look at it with an economist's eyes.

In the last several years, my position has been to advise government on politics. I have to recognize a little bit that we have political activities that have to be faced, so that I think we have to look at the solution to a problem, such as we are facing here, as an economic problem in its large sense; but, we have to look at it in a way that is acceptable politically. This particular solution is one that reinforces a political acceptance as a solution and political backing as a necessity for re-election of politicians. This might have some interesting consequences here.

Farmers may be isolated, but they are having contact with people. Their families are going to Manila, Mindanao and even the States. There is inner communication. They are aware of things. They are much more prepared. Even though we say there is still a good deal to be done, they are much more prepared to do things than they were 10 years ago. I think we know what is to be done, much better than we knew before. We have remedies provided we can bridge the socio-economic gap. I am convinced that even though this job is so immense, we can't wait not only because of the question of feeding the people, but if the Philippines and other countries, like the Philippines except to rise to standards of living eventually within any reasonable length of time similar to the approach that we are finding in the West, we have to start at a time when we can really save enough while the population is still small and labor-land ratios are small enough so that we have hope of moving ourselves to a higher level.

We go to the successful approach used in East Pakistan. There is where the problem is more critical. 95% of the population are non-urban. The average farm family here owns less than 1 hectare of land and very little potential arable land is not cultivated. Per capita income is less than 1/2 of the Philippines, up to 1950. Postwar years, productivity and agriculture was practically stagnant. This has some relevance to Philippine picture, but much more bleak picture in 1962. Up to that time, they did not have much political changes. Basically, they took some of Dr. Castillo's warnings. They did not attempt to establish new organizations but they attempted to vitalize existing organizations. Their method of doing or providing capital was to divide authority and responsibility for actual handling of funds down to the lowest political level.

How were results obtained more rapidly? They tried to face one of the major problems that cause action from moving rapidly. I had the idea that the farmers are pre-rational men. To the farmer, this risk element is life and death. If he is going to spend ₱200 for additional fertilizers and if he loses it, this is really a life-and-death decision for him. To try to bypass this decision momentarily, they asked what was done to meet this question. They looked at one of the areas where this type of risk factor was involved. This is particularly true in construction closely related to the farmers --- drainage which was dilapidated, poor irrigation, etc. The farmer knew where a road could be put, that is, between his little settlement and the nearest market which will not interfere in the drainage in his land. So they asked this question, "Where can we find this person who can do this most effectively and probably most available to do it?" Again the answer came to the farmer. Another question was how graft can be minimized in the program. They argued that if the handling of the money was close enough to the man who expected results from that money, that man was to help advise or to see that the politician spends the minimum amount.

You find time after time that a man was drawn out of the Union Council. A barber or a landless laborer was put in because the people had more confidence in him than the man in charge who was squandering money. There was terrific change because of this, putting down the money at the lowest level for a number of reasons. Briefly, their program started in the first year at a rather modest scale about a quarter of the portion of Pakistan. They used another good judgment, and saw to it that it started where there was possibility of success.

To each barrio council, there was given between 5 to 15 thousand pesos. It was not a very big sum, but a sum which, if used with available labor and intensive activity would produce surprising results. The problem of illiteracy where farmers cannot handle any sophisticated program is less than 15%. They were still able to devise a simple enough bookkeeping system with a person in that village who could write.

The government gave the proviso that no program should be distated from the top. Every project had to be devised and outlined, written up as feasible program by the people. It should veto it if conflicted with a larger program or if there were some technical aspects which the capital resources could not cope with. Some programs were drainage, irrigation, roads and a few similar activities which in later years had been expanded.

The area where most government agencies had representatives became the connecting link between this program handled by the lower unit and the government assistance that might be necessary, both technical and in some sense, advisory as to help in their program. It became a training center for specialists that grew up in the barrio. Because of their need for such help, it forced them into much greater action than they had before. There were some help supplemented by an agency. Some of these are irrigation works, bridges, etc. There was nobody in the village who could make the drawings. The people played a very surprising part in working directly in those areas where our technical skills could be used.

The first year was so successful that the second expanded into the entire country. Instead of ₱5,000 to ₱15,000 per Union, they jumped to double and in some cases trebled. Thousands of miles of roads were constructed,

not national highways but road leading from farm settlement to markets. They gave the farmers market for their products. They also increased the contract of farmers with the world itself. At least 50% of all the old dilapidated drainage systems had been rehabilitated by the end of last year. This had an immediate effect on reducing the damage from floods. A large percentage of the old irrigation systems were rehabilitated or built. None of these works was done by contract with specialists from construction firms, but was done by the Union Council people, administering the surplus labor that was available in non-planting season in the rural areas with whatever technical guidance was available from official agencies like the Peace Corps. The administrative capacity had an enormous potential in this lowest area. The administrative capacity was there and it was done by the people at the lowest level. The farmers saw the results. The leakage had been found to be at the minimum because of the type of supervision. As this feasibility of the local area became evident, the government started to subsidize fertilizers up to 50%. They were working on the assumption that the cost of getting farmers to know what could be done could be paid in the economy as a whole. Subsidized fertilizers were handled through the private sector. Large scale irrigation project was moved by the government itself and their water was heavily subsidized in order to make the farmers make use of it. Subsidy was being gradually withdrawn even if only four years had elapsed. So, this brought the rural people to live in a very rapid movement. When the elections came, it was very evident that those who were elected in areas where the rural people who held the majority asked who backed the program. The President who had dictatorial ways lost in every big city in the country, but he won in the rural areas by a 60-40 vote. As a result, the program which was originally financed from sources of funds outside of the country now is financed by internal funds, because these politicians who had other objectives to start with realized that their reelection depended upon this type of support which they received.