

PNABH 980
71583
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PHILIPPINE - AMERICAN RURAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP

June 6 - 17, 1966

U. P. COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

LOS BAÑOS, LAGUNA

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

AMONG GOVERNMENT AGENCIES, PRIVATE GROUPS AND VILLAGE PEOPLE

FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS

by

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PNABH 980
J SN 71583

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630.11914
P549

Philippine-American Rural Development Work-
shop. Los Banos, Laguna. Jun.6-17, 1966.

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ment of rural areas. Horace C. Holmes.

6 p.

1.Development planning - Philippines.

2.Rural development - Philippines.

I.Holmes, Hora 7. II.Title.

This paper deals largely with those types of rural programs or development activities that require full and active participation on the part of rural people, and the gearing in of non-village groups so as to be of most help in achieving meaningful results.

It is recognized that there are many activities within a country, that are essential for the growth and welfare of rural people. Many of these take place without the necessary participation of the villagers, even though the effects of such activities may be very real to the villager in a number of ways. Policies that effect the prices, availability or quality of such essential inputs as fertilizer, insecticides, implements or repair parts; prices received for crops and livestock products or policies that affect cost of transportation or deal with land ownership, banking, the education system and such are some examples. But then many of these policies have great effect upon the non-farm population as well. The effect of such activities, policies and decisions may be such as to encourage agricultural productivity and to provide some incentives to the people on the land. On the other hand, the effect may be just the opposite. There should be a full understanding of just what the effects will be and whether such effects are in the direction desired. These are policy matters beyond the scope of this paper. They are important - even vital for development to take place. But it takes much more than this. A most determined dedicated and well meaning rural program can be thwarted by unwise or uninformed decisions about which the villager himself has little to say.

I want to pose three questions at the outset that I think are important to keep in mind as we attempt to carry out any type of rural activity with which we expect the villager or anyone else to cooperate. These are:

1. What are we trying to do?
2. Why are we trying to do it?
3. How do we get it done?

These seem so simple. But are they? I have a feeling that we often become quite deeply involved in the last one, before we really understand the first two. We are sometimes guilty of seeking cooperation in method without developing a clearly defined and mutually acceptable objective. This leads to trouble.

What Are We Trying To Do?

There must be a clear-cut, frequently reviewed and mutually agreed-upon objective. All too often, the planners have one objective or a series of them; the implementers another, and the people who are expected to react, to cooperate, to work for, have another. All concerned can be, and usually are, well intentioned, deeply interested in progress, yet somehow little seems to happen. Each, viewing the problem from his own background and experience, wonders why the others fail to cooperate as they should. Lack of a clear-cut, mutually agreed upon objective at best leads to confusion. It may lead to complete failure.

Some will remember "The Tea House of The August Moon". In this story of the occupation of Okinawa, the planners decided to build a school, and wanted the villagers to cooperate. No doubt a school was needed and would have been most helpful to the people of the village. But the villagers' order of priorities did not place the school as the most important need.

They wanted a tea house. They would not cooperate to build the school. But they built the tea house with great enthusiasm. The school came later. It wouldn't work the other way around.

I believe that one of the greatest barriers to winning and keeping the cooperation of village people is that all too often the planners insist upon the villagers working on those things that the planners themselves feel should have top priority. A school not a tea house. It would be more fruitful to settle on something that both feel to be important. Important enough that each can and will cooperate toward a common understandable goal.

I have observed over the past thirty years, that many so called rural programs have failed because they never actually got to the farmers or the villagers in an effective way. Despite the urging and pleading of the officials, even threats and the granting subsidies, the farmers are often unimpressed. The farmers were said to be "adamant", "lazy", "uncooperative", "listless". Yet these very same people may show an amazing talent to do things that they want to do even without the officials' help. It is not only a matter of priority, it is a matter of whose priority. The typical bureaucratic solution to this problem is to get more staff and start more programs - repeating the same errors. The only thing "rural" about many so called rural programs is the name. Far too many such efforts are conceived in an urban setting, born of urban parents and thoroughly grounded with urban attitudes. By the time the farm people see one of these urban-oriented, unplanned for, demanding six foot bullies, is when he is brought to the village and the people are told that "he is yours", and that they should love him! The odds are great that villagers not only won't love "him". They may feel more like running away from him! Now does this new "wonder" who has come to the village look around to see where and how he can be helpful? Usually not. He is more likely to now tell the villagers what they should do. He has targets and goals that have been established. These he must achieve, or at least report as having been achieved. This in order to justify his keep to his real parents, the department or agency that created him.

If the villagers don't hurry out and help him achieve these goals or targets, he says that they are uncooperative, they are "unwilling to progress". If this happens, the unlucky villagers may find that they now have another visitor. This one to study them to see why they did not cooperate with the first one.

Several years ago I had the occasion to work with some of the American Indian tribes in our Southwest. These people knew some of their problems, but somehow were not getting much help. One very perceptive Indian leader explained that the typical Navajo family consisted of a man, his wife, five children, four dogs, five horses, and an anthropologist. They have been studied a great deal - perhaps too much. They wanted to work on some of their own priorities.

When a young man came to work with them started helping them improve new roads so that the school buses could bring their children to school;

when he helped them build their own community house, he got wonderful cooperation. People came for twenty miles to help. Perhaps I should say that the Navajos themselves got cooperation, for they were working on things that they wanted - their tea house. There always can be some meeting of minds about something, about which most people in the village feel that something can and should be done.

A Cooperating Agency, or group attempting to improve rural living, should know what these high priority problems are in the area in which they are trying to work. Such a group or agency should know the range and extent of their own resources and capabilities, and the extent to which they might be useful in helping the villagers meet some of their needs that they themselves feel should be met. They should also know what other organizations, groups or individuals have to offer, and seek their help for the villagers - not for themselves. It is at this point where the available resources and skills of the Cooperating Agency or agencies can and should be geared into the recognized needs of the local people, that an effective start can be made toward a sound development project, and one with which the local people will work. It should not only be "a tea house"; it should be the Villagers Tea House.

The villagers in a west African country wanted a school, and asked the Government to provide a teacher. The villagers offered to build a school building. The Government sent an expert to make a survey. In this area the villagers all lived in round houses. They knew how to build them. They planned to build a round school. The expert recommended a rectangular school instead. It was found to be necessary by the expert to get an outside architect and carpenter, as the local people did not know how to build a "proper school". The rains came - a year passed before the architect came. Another year passed before the school was built. By that time the villagers had lost interest. The villagers did not feel that the school belonged to them; it belonged to the Government. One can't help but wonder how it was determined that the children in that village who lived all their lives in round houses couldn't learn to read and write in a round school! The people's initiative had been smothered. Their high priority project had been taken away from them by a well meaning but insensitive expert.

The problem of obtaining villager cooperation is not so much one of getting villagers to cooperate with a project, but more one of getting the appropriate agency, department or group to cooperate within the limits of their own resources, with the local people and to help them solve problems about which the people themselves are acutely concerned.

A common error is to design a project based upon what an agency can do alone rather than on a recognized problem of the village people about which the agency can contribute something toward a solution.

Why Do It

The lack of a real conviction on the part of the village leaders of the necessity or desirability of an undertaking is usually a major reason for poor cooperation.

Many dead and failing projects have been "sold" by the protagonists to a people who were too polite to say no. Much more is required than

that the proposed undertaking be good for the village, the community, or even the whole country. Most of us remember as children how we were told by well meaning parents that castor oil was "good for us". Despite many doses I believe very few ever learned to like it.

The real question is not just that the official or the professional worker be convinced that an undertaking is "good for the people". What about the people who are expected to do something, or not do something, when the doing or not doing, is a necessary part of a successful operation?

What about the people who are expected to benefit? Are they to be active participants? Is their active participation of significance or are they merely to be the recipients of some scheme in which their cooperation is not needed or expected?

If the villagers are expected to participate, to cooperate, to do something or stop doing something, so as to further the aims and objectives of the undertaking; then they must know and accept the reason, and it must make sense to them from their own background and experience. This may be quite different from that of the agency representative.

Since experiences differ, and fortunately everyone doesn't think alike, those who are to cooperate must come to some judgement and either accept or reject some of the ideas and reasons, or must modify them somewhat in order to make them his own. If he has a chance to discuss, to raise his doubts, to voice his fears, to add his ideas, he becomes in part a parent and "can recognize his own child". This one he can love. The alternative to this is to ignore the whole thing. This frequently happens. Then we wonder why he doesn't cooperate.

It would be a great disservice if someone could discover how to overcome the so-called "non-cooperative attitude" of village people. This attitude has saved many a farmer in many a country, including my own, from many impractical ideas advanced by well meaning but uninformed helpers. Should the day arrive when rural people cease to question proposals made to them, cease to evaluate, adapt, adopt, reject or ignore advice so freely offered, then that will mean the time has come when freedom to choose has ended. We have already seen too much of this. Let's not try to promote more.

Why, what is the reason? How do we know that this proposal, this technique, this seed, this improved animal, this marketing arrangement is something that will help? This is the reason that farmers like a demonstration. This is why he is willing to be a party to a small trial. It is in order to get proof. Let us not try to deny him of this. But he thankful that he possesses so much wisdom, as to demand it!

How To Get It Done

When we, and those with whom we wish to cooperate have really come to thoroughly understand and agree on what we are trying to do and why we should do it. We have progressed a long way toward getting it done.

On every hand we find agencies, organizations and individuals with solutions in search of problems. Would it not be more productive to

inventory our resources and see where we can cooperate, not only with those who are directly concerned with their own problems, but also with other agencies, both public and private, who can contribute to the solution, but not dominate those whom we are trying to help.

Cooperating Institutions

In almost any country, one can find many public and private agencies that have been set up to do something for the rural community. These include experimental farms, seed farms, livestock disease control offices, agricultural offices, plant protection offices, farm machinery centers, marketing arrangements, etc.

In the field of education there are the regular schools, farm schools, vocational schools, the extension service and a host of others.

Then in the field of health there are the local dispensaries, sanitation program, midwife training and so on. Some are doing excellent work in practically every case, there are others that may be much less effective.

There is a strong tendency for the planners of new programs to ignore existing institutions, and to set up a new one designed to do something without first trying to make existing ones more effective.

It is true that one frequently finds some existing institution that is dead - and has been dead for a long time - only the funeral has been postponed. But there are more that can be revitalized with a little encouragement, cooperation and help. This offers a fertile field for cooperation gearing an existing resource to serve an area more effectively.

The Tennessee Valley Authority is an outstanding example of the successful application of this principle on a large scale. Coming into an underprivileged area more than thirty years ago, this group decided to work with and through a number of potentially good local institutions rather than setting up their own, they strengthened the existing ones. This included experiment stations, extension services, health and education programs, etc.

The result of this policy of giving cooperation toward the attainment of mutually high priority goals has resulted in a degree of inter-agency cooperation in the seven valley states that has been unique.

An inter-agency cooperation arrangement in Argentina is outstanding. Here the various departments of the Agricultural Experiment Stations, the Extension Service, local banks and civic groups are all cooperating with local farmers. The aim to increase the production and profitableness of corn. In other areas the highest priority is given beef production, etc. A problem oriented approach where all concerned contribute what they can to the solution. There are no problems of lack of farm cooperation.

There are many such examples of the successful application of this principles.

I believe that what I have said about the relationship of those who would help, to those who would be helped; the necessity for participation

in the planning, by those who are to cooperate in the execution; about the identification of the problems and the agreement upon areas of high priority, are just as valid between states as they are within states.

Cooperation comes as a result of common interest, common concerns, an agreement on goals and objectives and of mutual trust and respect. It is like a tiny plant that must be given thoughtful care, watered enough but not too much, fertilized sufficiently but not killed in the process. It does not emerge full grown, blossom the next day and bear fruit the next. It is the nature of the plant we must adapt to it, try to understand it - not complain because it is as it is. Should we expect less of man!

Now that I have committed heresy - may be annoyed, perhaps bored you, it is your turn to adapt, seek common ground, reject or ignore all that I have said. Is not that just what we have been talking about?

It is the way to find common ground, and plot a course that we can walk together. Each helping the other when the need arises. But neither claiming the road to be his alone.