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Philosophical differences in approaching agricultural technical assistance.

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PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES IN APPROACHING AGRICULTURAL TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

by

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I

It is a little difficult to decide what is expected of one who is given this assignment. I am particularly interested in the word "philosophical" when used in this context, and especially why it is assigned to me. Perhaps it is because I minored and taught in the Philosophy Department. I doubt if one can say that there are different approaches to technical assistance sufficiently well articulated to qualify as alternative general theories, much less as expressions of different underlying philosophical systems. I presume much less than this is being suggested for me; certainly much less will be forthcoming.

But perhaps there is some justification in a philosophic approach -- in a somewhat formal meaning of the term -- to the discussion today. For, in a real way, philosophy's role is to question many of our normally accepted ideas -- and to doubt most of the answers.

From the vantage point of this self-imposed detachment, I should like to raise some questions, in a non-systematic way, purely

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for the value of the thought they might stimulate among you. I shall raise my questions chiefly through assertions designed to challenge prevailing ideas. And if they seem too obviously wrong, please don't be unduly concerned; they cut across the grain of many of my own biases, too. And this luxury of detachment is only for a day. Tomorrow I shall again be a bureaucrat, tied perhaps more closely than any of you to prevailing premises, principles and practices.

II

I should like to arrange my questions on different approaches to technical assistance into those of method, those of substance or content, and those of structure.

On matters of method, I should like to question the emphasis we have all placed on the so-called advisory role as contrasted with a more participatory role of U.S. technical assistance workers.

The accepted characterization of our proper role is that of advisor. This concept has much going for it. It emphasizes the necessity for host countries, institutions and personnel to develop their own capacities, and not to rely on us to do their job for them. It removes the temptation (except where there is no alternative) for those countries to use our personnel simply to plug holes of special manpower deficiencies. It reduces the temptation for our personnel to design, carry out and judge their work in endocentric terms of their own project's success, rather than of its catalytic or generative impact on development of the host country or its institutions. And an advisory role implies a greater multiplier effect than does a participatory role - because one can presumably advise with respect

to more activities than he can participate in. Finally, the advisory-role doctrine connotes the proper degree of non-involvement with host country processes to assure maximum personal and diplomatic comfort.

But these propositions are often more impressive in logic than demonstrable in fact. It has always seemed to me that we have been most successful -- as in Taiwan -- where our role was most participatory, where our efforts and theirs were so conjoined as to be essentially one. Similarly, it has seemed to me that specific technical assistance projects or activities have been effective, largely in the degree that our personnel have been deeply involved as participants in local decision-making and implementation processes. Of one thing I am sure, individual Americans who have been most effective are those who have developed modus operandi which built their contributions in as organic components of local decision-making processes -- in short, those who participate rather than simply advise.

There are some generic reasons for this. In part, it is no doubt a result of relatively poor translation of the general advisory-role "philosophy" into specific implementation practices. For example, the policy of utilizing a U.S. technician primarily for in-service training of a single "counterpart," so fashionable a few years ago, had a ridiculously low multiplier potentiality. Also, the advisor-role approach places great strain on the absorptive capacity of the host country. As in my own office, most countries and institutions can absorb an almost unlimited number of people to help them do their job, but they can absorb the assistance of only very few advisors who

suggest (often unreasonably numerous) new approaches and activities which are, no doubt, improvements but necessarily time-consuming to adopt and implement.

But there are two deeper -- more "philosophic" if you prefer -- limiting factors in the advisor-role concept. The first has been identified, in its opposite, in the notion of non-involvement in local affairs. There is, I would assert, a sort of moral irresponsibility inherent in the very concept that it is for us to advise, and for them to accept or reject, to be sure, but in any event to take the consequences. Advice is cheap! But not to the one who acts upon it, if it is wrong. There is no doubt that advice-giving on the range of issues with which this conference is concerned is serious business. If acted upon, it commits resources, redirects careers, restructures bureaucracies and, in many cases, vastly redefines the entire set of opportunities and even ways of life of many, many people. There is a simple but brutal reality to the fact that if advice is not right, it is wrong.

There certainly is no way by which an American can be brought to share fully with his local counterparts in the consequences of his advice, no more than a physician's prescriptions can be made as important to him as to his patient. But surely the <u>system</u>, the <u>doctrine</u>, should work at maximizing, not minimizing, the responsibleness of the technical assistance process.

In clarification I should add that this is not an issue of morality or personal responsibility, but of policy, of approach, of

design, of technical assistance. Also, I should indicate that it is quite a different issue from that of the proper degree of official U.S. involvement in the affairs of other countries.

The second philosophic issue in the advisory versus participatory-role concept has to do with the way the American looks upon his job. Is his job, from his base of superior knowledge and experience, to advise them on what to do? Or is it to mix his specific scientific or other analytical capabilities with their special insights and experiences in a mutual, systematic effort to try to figure out what to do? These may not seem, on superficial glance, too different -- but they are diametric opposites. The first assumes that the American expert <u>knows</u> what should be done! Or, more accurately in most cases, that our solutions apply to their problems, if they are of a roughly similar nature. Sometimes they do. More often, they won't even apply to our own problems by the time the expert returns home. The second formulation assumes only that the problem will yield to research or analytical treatment and that, if it is in an area of the American's special competence, he can make a highly important -- perhaps essential -- contribution to its solution. If he <u>is</u> competent, and if the problem <u>is</u> in his field of competence, and if he <u>does</u> work in a way that thoroughly integrates his contributions with those of the host country personnel, he can almost certainly improve on the judgment that would have been made without his participation. Often, of course, his contribution might be simply to assure that no judgment be made from the evidence in hand.

For the local officials, this is the heart of the distinction. It is not the foreign advisor who speaks to them, but the evidence. Not his report, but their own analysis -- to which, to be sure, the American had made a very important contribution. It carries its message of general principles through data, analysis and conclusions directly relevant for action after it has first met the requirements of such external issues as expediency, local acceptability, politics and the like. In other words, they have something they can act upon. And it is just possible, if the right combination of people have been in the exercise, that the next time they can do it alone.

For the American, the value of this type of participatory role is that his recommendations stand a good chance of being right. He has done what he has been trained for and knows how to do -- apply his special capabilities as a scientist to the solution of a problem at hand. He has contributed to only a part of the total judgment, but it is the part where he understands the evidential basis for his contribution.

III

This takes me to the point of different approaches as they apply to content or substance of technical assistance. Much of what I would say has already been implied, and time permits me little more. Pursuit of proper methods of technical assistance which might be characterized as research-in-action would go far to assure the proper shifts in substance. Certainly there are great differences from country to country and local institution to institution, and few

generalizations apply generally. One of the most commonly encountered situations in the less developed countries is the relatively old institution which has rigidified into a mechanical teaching machine (or if we use terms loosely enough, a research and teaching machine) and which has lost whatever contact it may have had with national development processes. Lacking this interplay with its own society, it stultifies, loses local support, further stultifies -- in short, "institutionalizes." In such case, the adjustments most immediately called for are usually organizational.

A certain amount of form must be built up before substance can be built in. Therefore, much of our technical assistance -- especially University contract work -- has been, quite literally and properly, institution building.

In other cases, we have started from scratch. Obviously, here the building of organizational staffing and physical structure must come first.

But we must not forget what caused its older cousins to reach a condition requiring such extensive repair; namely, the lack of a powerful, sustained, creative contribution to the development of their own society. Such a role would have created -- and required -- a corresponding sensitivity and responsiveness of the institution to the needs of its society. And thus the circular interaction of institutional and societal development -- instead of impotent stagnation -- would have been institutionalized.

I would suggest:

-- that, in most countries, the first phase of institution building is behind us;

-- that the job now is to put genuine substance into the activities of these institutions;

-- that this requires much more attention to specific research and service opportunities for these institutions;

--that this is a much longer-term job, requiring different types, more highly trained and more scientifically-oriented Americans than the first job;

--that if we fail to do justice by this stage, the accomplishments to date will wash out in all too many cases because we stopped too soon -- and probably wound up on the wrong points of emphasis;

-- that in trying to help them out of their traditionalism we may have made a lateral pass of organizational and structural forms relevant to our country in only one point in time -- and that for this to rigidify through lack of functionalism may be no great improvement over what they had without us!

Fortunately, it need not be this way. We have plenty of time. In fact, we have all the time there is or ever will be, if we use it. But I would submit that not much (but clearly some) of the work we have been doing is of the right content or character for most of the work, essential work, yet to be done.

IV

I should like to conclude with some comments on the structure of technical assistance. As the nature of the job to be done through technical assistance to agriculture changes, so should -- and we should hope will -- the structure of technical assistance programs.

In the decades of the fifties and sixties, we have been engaged primarily in institution building. In the seventies, we shall, in part, be engaged in finishing this part of the job. But more importantly, I should hope, we shall be engaged in helping institutionalize in those institutions the capabilities and patterns of participation in their societies which will assure their continued growth and significance. The basic structure of technical assistance operations required to achieve this is undoubtedly very different from that we have followed for the earlier phases.

Policy should reflect the fact that U.S. interest in this follow-through is essentially independent of the question of whether or not the host country's balance-of-payments or short-term political situation is such as to merit U.S. financial assistance.

A first and obvious requisite is that opportunities be created for such follow-through. Also, that policy recognize that the rate of return to the United States, as well as the host country interest, is vastly greater to this last increment of input than to that which preceded it. In fact, like the last chapter of a detective story, it is the part which gives the payoff to that which went before.

Clearly we should think of new patterns of relationships between our country's professional resources and those of the less developed countries. Probably government-to-government dimensions of the relationship should be greatly reduced. So-called "sisterhood" institution-to-institution relationships should no doubt continue to play a part. Probably formal professional associations, as well as less formal within-discipline world-wide relationships, need be expanded. No doubt genuinely international, organized research efforts on specific problems must evolve. Substantial reorientation of our own institutions to give international scholarship its due weight is clearly imperative. The proper blueprint is by no means clear. I can only hope that we build it around careful analysis of the job to be done and our own interest in it, rather than from minor patchwork on past practice.

Probably the most serious single question for this activity in the seventies and beyond has to do with the extent to which we attempt it purely through country-by-country activities. The development of institutional and human resource capabilities in the less developed countries is, of course, a necessary condition of their development. But it is necessary that we -- and most especially they -- have a real comprehension of the limitations of this approach. There is absolutely no possibility that any less developed country can even approximate the capability of going it alone in bringing the powers of modern science, and scholarship generally, to the service of their country -- at least within our life-times. Improved

communications, journals, conferences, professor and student exchanges and the like will contribute greatly. But problems of scale will completely estop the great breakthroughs necessary to change adequately the parameters of the possible for these countries.

The imperative challenge to our ingenuity is not that of how to enable the less developed countries to parallel our scientific, technological and economic growth, but how to enable them to participate fully in it. It would be the easiest and most disastrous of mistakes to squander our and the less developed countries' resources in unorganized driblets of minute, endlessly replicative bits of research and development on problems which by their nature require great concentration. of not only financial resources but extremely scarce scientific capabilities. We absolutely must reflect seriously on this basic problem of scale in research. We should consider, for example, both the significance and the magnitude of an all out effort to bend completely the plant to the human will -- towards which we have already made substantial beginnings. We should realize that local adaptation is essential, but that is also relatively easy if there is something relevant to adapt (like the photo-insensitive wheats or the high lysine and tryptophan genes in maize). Also, we need to reflect seriously on the numerical dominance of this country in scientific capability, and ask ourselves how to use this as a resource to the development of world-wide capability for development. And how ti avoid allowing de facto Chauvinism and false national prides from

preventing development of such a genuine capability for world-wide development.

The effort simply to aid countries to "catch up" with the developed countries is, in itself, a losing game because ours is -- and I should hope will be -- an accelerating momentum.

Viewed in this light, the disparities can only widen. But we can build bridges to them, across which scholars and scholarship cross, and over which they can enter as participants in our progress. More specifically, we can work with them to develop systematic attacks on the opportunities which organized research effort can create -- so that they participate fully with us in the trip to the new moon which is surely on this earth. This we can do if we recognize that it is as much in our interest as theirs. I believe we will.