

Lessons from History in AID  
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AID has experienced and made quite a lot of history with its accumulated activities in foreign assistance to a wide range of countries over some 30 years. (The name AID is intended to encompass predecessor agencies.) Since AID has been an unusual innovative agency, this history should be of more than usual interest. But it is sometimes said that AID has no memory, and so cannot learn from its own experiences. Individual employees and contractors of AID do store up the lessons from their own experiences, apply them as they work in one place after another, and convey them in some degree to those who work with them. But this is a non-systematic way of mobilizing experience, and it is weakened by the tendency among many of AID's technicians and administrators to leave the agency after only a few assignments: even the more enduring staff do not always see AID as their main career. The short and medium run turnover in AID has been unusually high for reasons having to do with its "non-permanent" character and its reliance on a wide spectrum of specialists to perform changing functions.

Institutional memory is normally maintained by paper records when human memory are insufficient. AID's practitioners leave behind them a record of routine reports, ample in volume but questionable in some other respects. Aside from reports on minor transitory matters for operational purposes, too many reports on projects or other activities are written in part to boost or maintain support for programs on which the reputation, even the job, of the writer may depend. Further, there is a tendency for those who have chosen to take their specialties overseas with AID to be missionaries or at least sincere believers in the value of their particular activity - a view which would color their interpretation of realities. Thus, the cumulative record of routine reporting from the field, or indeed of many reports at headquarters (given an effort to move support in one's bureaucratic direction), may well be unreliable as history or as guidance to operational decisions.

AID has attacked the latter problem through the program for project evaluation by persons detached from the projects under review. Comprehensive and refined methods of project appraisal have been developed; and with the passage of time the application of these techniques to more and more projects is building up a backlog of high quality evaluations. While these evaluations are designed in large part to guide Mission directors rather than to serve as elements of a composite history (or so I've been told), they should be able to perform the latter function as well. AID has also been improving its institutional memory by reforms in its record keeping systems. Computerization with attention to subject classification and cross reference is one aspect; systematic abstracts written on AID-supported research activities is another.

The preceding description (which is not exhaustive) deals with inputs to an institutional memory. For such a memory to be activated, more is required: the items on the record must be reviewed and analyzed, and their implications for policy brought out. Frequently there will be contradictory implications in the experiences reviewed so there must be further analysis of the evidence as it bears on the relative virtues of one policy or cluster of policies as against another. While there are different ways of going about it, some such process of search, assembly, analysis of evidence, followed by analysis of generalized implications is needed to find the lessons from AID's experience.

AID has undertaken this kind of process for defined functional programs, with varying degrees of thoroughness, in its Spring Reviews -- another AID innovation.

AID has also generated thoughtful analysis of problems by one or a few people, and this has led to occasional think-pieces inside the agency and outside -- whether as Discussion Papers or in other formats. The Spring Reviews are the most systematic of these efforts to mobilize experience and draw conclusions therefrom. In some cases the research effort has led to a considerable accumulation of knowledge (depending of course on its scope, which reflects its budget); and the combination of research with policy consideration, and the bringing together of academics with practitioners and of U. S. experts with LDC nationals has been fruitful. The problems with the Spring Review as a general method are, first, that it takes a great deal of manpower -- requiring both effort and money -- to do a meaningful job in this way; and second, that the residue it leaves behind does not do justice to the magnitudes of the inputs. Usually there is a big heap of documents, extremely heterogeneous as well as bulky, and although there are often very good items among them these are hard for a reader to identify -- so they all tend to remain in a neglected pile. The summary reports, which survey findings and give policy conclusions, are more accessible and are widely circulated. These are valuable and useful; but for their purposes the review of findings is necessarily too short and streamlined to convey much of the flavor and complexity of what lies behind it.

Does it matter that AID is letting much of its history slide into oblivion? There is a great deal of it that is not with preserving, of course, and the question is whether there is an appreciable amount which could be of value that is not being retained or mobilized under present procedures. More and more organizations today are keeping more and more records, but the case for doing this should not be assumed without question; records should have some prospect of being used for meaningful purposes. AID's experiences should be unusually meaningful to the extent that they can illuminate the development process through which the Third World is moving, a process which is imperfectly understood -- though much is being learned -- but which will increasingly shape the world around us. The U. S. will find Third World relationships impinging on our economy with growing force as time passes; even a reversion to a politically isolationist stance, if it recurs, would not eliminate our dependence on imported materials. AID's history should supply insights into both the development process itself and the ways in which various U. S. contributions to Third World development have worked out in practice.

If there is a general case for learning more from AID's history, what would be the main uses of such lessons, and in what form would they be most useful? Perspectives from past experience are certainly helpful to avoid making the same mistake repeatedly, or to find and replicate successful policies. But this puts the matter too simply: clearcut victories or disasters may be easy to remember without special effort, but there are many more examples of policy results that are harder to characterize and easier to forget. This is especially true where reasons for "success" or the lack of it arise more from the conditions in the LDC than from the U. S. policies or intentions in question. Lessons from history thus require not only a review of what happened but a disciplined analysis of what it was that led to particular results, even though something different could have been and perhaps was expected in the basis of earlier experience. Policy premises may be wrong, or they may be wrong in some places, or at particular times, but not universally. It is in this kind of inference from experience that is less obvious that a systematic analysis of history can be potentially most valuable for policy development, and especially in a field where there are numerous unknowns and the known elements may be in a state of flux.

If this is valid, what would be the best way to focus the assembly and analysis

of experience for obtaining most useful results, and at reasonable cost? Several possibilities can be cited: 1) The Spring Reviews, discussed earlier; 2) the ad hoc support of individual thinkpieces by able and concerned people under non-routine AID contracts, or on leave from AID duties, as problems appear to present themselves; 3) a systematic composition of official AID policy statements on defined subject areas, produced by AID personnel with official clearances (these could be elaborated more than they have been so far to resemble the World Bank's Sector Policy Papers); 4) a massive, scholarly history of AID by distinguished academics with foundation auspices (like the multi-volume history of the World Bank by Asher and Mason); or finally 5) a systematic series of products of intermediate length, produced by AID contractors with AID collaboration, covering pertinent sectors with a review of empirical findings and an analysis of policy options (as opposed to a presentation of official policy views and conclusions).

I would argue the virtues of the last approach as follows: A systematic series will accomplish more than ad hoc compositions by ensuring a persistent effort to examine all policy areas, including not only those with recognized problems but those where opportunities and problems may be inadequately recognized. Policy areas and emphases change from time to time, to be sure; but histories and analyses can and should be updated and reexamined periodically in any case.

An intermediate sized product, not attempting a complete history of AID nor assembling an undigested pile of empirical studies, yet giving readers a stronger sense of what has happened and of the interrelationships involved than could a statement oriented mainly to current policy conclusions, would supply a need that is not now being met. My suggestion would be for 100-150 page analyses of functional (rather than geographical) policy areas, written at a professional level for potentially nonprofessional readers. (There may also be a place for country-based or regional histories and analyses leading to geographically defined strategies, such as that of Jacoby for Taiwan. I believe more could be learned from systematic functional surveys that would be appropriate to AID's policy making requirements: country-oriented general policy surveys are being generated in various forms under present routines, and the coordination of U. S. policy among the offices dealing with one nation is better attended to than are the functional consequences of AID programs.) How broad each functional area for a single report should be is a question to be answered with consideration of matters such as cost, level of interest in topics, timing I could envisage, for purposes of discussion up to perhaps a dozen functional areas for a systematic coverage of AID activities in 100-150 page condensed presentations.

What should be the ingredients of such a product, if it is to do something that is not already being done? The high-quality evaluations of AID projects in a given field would be basic building blocks. How many of the more routine AID reports would prove valuable is difficult to say without trying it out -- some would, of course, but a system for screening them would have to be developed. Beyond that, it would be important to learn what the leading AID practitioners in field X have concluded from their experiences. This could best be achieved by interviews with both present and former AID people, including retired practitioners, and perhaps with some other experts in the Field who have not worked for AID. The question of how much of the non-AID experience should also be examined is one which must be answered in practical terms: a good report would certainly not be confined to AID projects (Spring Reviews are not), but time and cost and perhaps limited access to materials will set limits to how far the exploration can be carried. An effort to review the literature plus some pertinent interviews with leading thinkers, may represent a suitable compromise in the non-AID coverage.

Each product must contain a review of experience, using examples of particular as appropriate, but it should not be given a project-by-project form of presentation. Well-rounded descriptions of some key project experiences should not be ruled out, however, and there ought to be a flavor of the field reflected, not just ivory tower taxonomy and logic chopping. Nevertheless, the analytical portions would probably be the heart of the endeavor. This should include analyses by problem along with the relevant policies, and then analyses of the implications of one policy for other problem/policy areas. A review of innovations, innovative suggestions, and areas for research should be presented. Whether these strands could then be woven into coherent strategies, or presented in terms of basic strategic choices, is less easy to project in undefined territory; but certainly the effort should be made to organize rather than merely list, the policy options.

Beyond this it is difficult to generalize without trying out the art form, which is not quite the same as any existing product. But it is appropriate to conclude with a few words about my experience in writing Credit for Small Farmers in Developing Countries as part of the 1973 Spring Review, as this is the closest thing to a model for my proposal and was the starting point for the thinking on the subject. It demonstrates that something along these lines can be done, and within certain time and cost boundaries.

In the 1972/73 planning AID decided that an intermediate book-sized product from that Spring Review was desirable, and commissioned me to do it. It may have been conceived as a job of editing extracts from SR reports with a bit of filling, but I found it wouldn't work that way. The SR Analytical Papers just didn't have in them adequate coverage of large portions of the subject, while the SR project reports could not be used as text. So I ended up writing two thirds of the pages and adapting SR papers for the rest -- the latter largely in a section giving alternative views on the role of credit. The completed book had 270 pages, which is longer than the form I am suggesting as appropriate for the proposal above.

It took 12 months to complete the first draft; during the preceding year I had spent perhaps two or three man-months reading SR papers and going to the regional conferences; following the first draft, another six months were occupied in getting revision ideas from AID's committee for the book and incorporating these plus my second thoughts into the final text. Since I was also getting out the Development Digest during this period (but with more assistance than usual), the dimensions of that venture required something like two-thirds of one person's time over a bit less than two years. This job could have been done in different ways with differing time requirements; and in any case the inputs and product of the proposal above are different from the book. But I believe this experience can provide some basis for estimating feasibilities of intermediate-sized reviews of history cum analyses of implications.