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RURAL POVERTY: ARE BASIC NEEDS RED HERRINGS?

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What is meant by basic needs? What are the arguments for and against giving basic needs priority in development? Are there ways in which we, as privileged non-rural outsiders, misperceive and underestimate rural poverty? Are basic needs then red herrings which conveniently direct our attention from the roots of rural poverty? And what implications follow? These are the questions I shall try to address.

Defining basic needs

It is useful to see the basic needs approach to rural poverty in an historical perspective. In the 1950s and early 1960s, growth in GNP per caput was thought to be enough to aim for, with the assumption that the poorer people would benefit from growth. When this did not work attention shifted to redistribution with growth, including the idea that the objective of economic growth should be qualified by deliberate measures to redistribute its benefits. This seems to have foundered to some extent from what is called a lack of political will. Now we have "basic needs", which seem to have been generally acceptable, at least at first, to a wide range of people in both richer and poorer countries. But basic needs has now been subject to criticism from several sides. Ronald Dore has remarked on "the accelerating rate of slogan obsolescence", (Dore 1978:13) and one may wonder what will come next. All the same, recognising that one concept or slogan follows another, and will continue to do so, is no reason for not taking seriously what we have at the moment; and for the moment at least, we have basic needs.

The basic needs approach is sometimes thought of in terms of the provision of services. But the statement by the Director-General of the ILO in the document Employment, Growth and Basic Needs, which arose out of the

World Employment Conference, is more comprehensive. He has written:

"For purposes of this discussion, basic needs are defined as the minimum standard of living which a society should set for the poorest groups of its people. The satisfaction of basic needs means meeting the minimum requirements of a family for personal consumption: food, shelter, clothing; it implies access to essential services, such as safe drinking water, sanitation, transport, health and education; it implies that each person available for and willing to work should have an adequately remunerated job. It should further imply the satisfaction of needs of a more qualitative nature: a healthy, humane and satisfying environment, and popular participation in the making of decisions that affect the lives and livelihood of the people and individual freedoms. . . . The satisfaction of an absolute level of basic needs as so defined should be placed within a broader framework, namely, the fulfilment of basic human rights, which are not only ends in themselves but also contribute to the attainment of other goals."

(Francis Blanchard, in ILO 1976:7)

Not many would wish to quarrel with that as a list of desirable objectives, but it does show that the basic needs concept or slogan is elastic. Most desirable things can be described as basic needs, providing there is not too much of them. There is scope for interpretation, and for setting one's own priorities within the list. Thus Maurice Williams, the Chairman of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, has given a somewhat different emphasis, in which he stresses, not basic needs which imply the provision of services, but productivity, employment and incomes. He says:

"... the central objective for a basic needs programme must be to expand the income of the poorest people through increases in productivity and generation of new employment opportunities." He then goes on to list food security, health services, lowering the rate of population growth, and investment in people (Williams 1977:5-7). Basic needs can, indeed, mean different things to different people. The danger is, then, that they will incorporate the predispositions of observers to include those items most convenient and least threatening to themselves, and leave out whatever they find awkward or embarrassing. In considering the arguments for and against a basic needs strategy, it is salutary to be introspective and to recognise the ease with which we can rationalise to our own advantage.

Real Hope?

Let us first consider arguments in favour of a basic needs approach. Three seem strong.

First, the very use of the term concentrates attention and thought on priorities and on the poorer people. There is no disputing that the items which have been mentioned, and the four (food, health, education and housing) listed in the brochure for this conference, are important objectives and constitute desirable minimum targets. But they cannot all be attained everywhere at once. Choices have to be made and priorities set. The term also automatically raises the question what are, or should be, basic needs. It gets us closer than did "redistribution with growth" to examining the condition of the poorer rural people, and to seeing things through the eyes of those whose basic needs we are presuming to identify.

Second, planning in terms of basic needs demonstrates the extent to which they are not met and concentrates attention on what would be needed to meet them in the future. It directs attention to those regions and people who have tended to be left out or left behind, to areas where there are larger numbers of poorer people, to the peripheries and to the people at the margin. It draws attention to the rapid increases which are anticipated in rural populations, which are often greater than has commonly been realised. FAO estimates for the 25-year period 1975 - 2000, even after assuming threefold or fourfold increases in urban populations, give percentage increases for rural populations of a range of countries as follows:

Bangladesh 85; Ethiopia 70; Ghana 53; Honduras 90; India 45; Indonesia 48; Kenya 109; Nepal 75; Nigeria 82; Pakistan 64; Philippines 55; Rhodesia 100; Ruanda 96; Sudan 89; Tanzania 107; Thailand 77; Vietnam 48; Zaire 44.

While these projections may be a little high, their orders of magnitude are unlikely to be disturbed unless by war or other disaster. In terms of the provision of services, the implications can be startling. In education, for example, it has been estimated (Colclough 1978:28) that the number of children in the 5-14 years age group who are not at school will increase from about 269 million in 1970 to about 375 million in 1985, an increase of almost 40 per cent in the numbers of those left out.

Third, a basic needs approach may improve aid programmes. It may encourage donors to be less restrictive on local costs, since so much of basic needs expenditure for services has to be in local costs. It may also provide a useful slogan for reviving and sustaining support for aid programmes.

Red Herrings?

In three respects, however, we can ask whether there are not dangers that basic needs will prove to be red herrings, of their providing a comforting and convenient focus which evades the tougher, thornier, more threatening questions which we would rather not confront. Three dangers can be seen here:

(1) the danger of diverting attention away from international issues
Third world critics of the basic needs movement see it as a not very subtle evasion of more important questions of international inequality. They point to issues in the debate on the New International Economic Order in the North-South dialogue, to unequal exchange, to transfer pricing through which multinational corporations soak up and suck away the surplus from poorer to richer countries (from which most of us here benefit), to the transfer of inappropriate technology, to technological, economic and political dominance and dependence, to the refusal of the industrialised countries to open their markets to the manufactured products of the developing countries. Others see basic needs as another diversion from examining the enormous investment, internationally and nationally, in the arms industry, based as it is in the industrialised countries, using at least half the Research and Development resources of the world, and providing livelihoods for something like 70 million people, many of them in the richer countries. For those of us from the richer countries, the danger is then that we are seeing the mote in the other man's eye and ignoring the beam in our own. There is much which could be done at our cost which would have an impact on rural poverty. Not all aid, or all commercial transfers, to developing countries are cornered or creamed off by exploitative national elites. The recent high coffee prices which made many of us grumble, but which made virtually no difference to our levels of living, meant prosperity in parts of rural Kenya. There was a counter-migration from urban to rural areas, and rural wages rose. They rose because the international coffee price was high and there was a transfer of wealth from people in the rich countries to people in the poorer countries. The implication is clear, that international commodity agreements which raised prices for the agricultural products of developing countries would often help to reduce rural poverty. But since we would have to pay, it is more convenient to talk about basic needs.

(ii) the danger of thinking that organising services is enough

The provision of services seems self-evidently good. The basic needs movement tends to be identified with service provision, with the approach that Robert Cassen has called "Count, cost and supply". Basic needs in health, education, water and transport lend themselves to analysis as purely financial, administrative, and logistic problems. But any such approach has severe limitations in practice. It is one thing to organise a service from the centre outwards - the supply approach. It is quite another for the poorer would-be clients to be able to take it up and benefit from it. There are always serious questions about who uses services, and who does not, and why those who do not do not. Some of the answers are well known. Services are often officially free. In practice, they often have to be paid for. Joseph Ssenyonga has written of education in the rural area of Kenya where he worked as a social anthropologist, and where education is legally free: "In fact, charges occur which make it prohibitive for the poorest to send their children to school." (Ssenyonga 1976:9) It is perhaps very general that "free" primary education is in practice not free because of charges levied on parents. This discriminates against the poor. In other spheres there are examples of corruption, for example in the distribution of famine relief when the "free" food is in practice sold to those, precisely not those most in need, who can afford to buy it. Moreover, government staff involved in the provision of services at the local rural level (and for reasons which are perfectly intelligible when you look at their lifestyles, aspirations and incomes) often ally themselves with the local elites and unofficially derive benefits from them for the provision of resources and services in ways which exclude the poorer people. A danger of concentrating on the organisation of services is, then, neglecting effective take up by those in need; a danger of mistaking the theory of supply, derived from top-downwards, centre-outwards calculations, for the reality of exclusion when the demand of those in need is ineffective.

(iii) the danger of diverting attention from the nature and causes of rural poverty and from solutions which are deeper and more permanent.

In considering basic needs from the point of view of the provision of services, we think in terms of the organisations of government and of voluntary agencies and their activities in rural areas. But do they at all significantly get to the roots of the problems of rural poverty? If we

ask why there are so many poor rural people in the world, perhaps more than half of humankind, there are many answers. Historically, rural poverty can be seen as a continuation of a condition of undevelopment. Or it can be seen as the result of a process of underdevelopment through the operation of colonialism, international capital, unequal exchange, and so on - an active process which has impoverished people. Or, on the lines that Michael Lipton has argued (Lipton 1977), it can be attributed to urban bias, to the tendency for urban areas to siphon off skills and surplus from rural areas. Or, to use Andrew Pearse's phrase, (Pearse 1977) rural poverty can be seen in terms of the "talents effect" - the tendency, as in the Biblical parable of the talents, for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer, losing even the little that they have. Or technology can be seen as a cause, with inappropriate capital-intensive techniques introduced from industrialised countries impoverishing rural people through displacing labour. Or some would see environmental degradation as a major factor, with rising numbers of the poorer people extruded from areas of higher potential, moving into fragile environments on steep forested slopes or open plains with low rainfall, where they will survive for a time through destroying - "mining" - the soil. Others, as in the case of the Sahel, see long-term climatic change at work. Then there is tropical seasonality as an explanation, with the widespread experience that the wet season brings crisis, with the need to work when food is short and exposure to infections high (Chambers et al 1979). Yet others argue that a key factor in rural poverty is agrarian relations and the unequal distribution of landholdings and other productive assets. And so on. This is far from a complete list; but it serves to raise the question whether a basic needs approach that emphasises the provision of services, however valuable in themselves, may not be a shallow cosmetic, a temporising palliative, a sop to those (the more accessible, the more powerful) who are able to benefit from them, and a placebo for the consciences of governments, voluntary agencies and donors alike, leaving the roots of poverty untouched.

Biases in Perception

This directs attention back at ourselves. Are we part of the problem? Should we examine how and why it is that we perceive and diagnose as we do? When I look back at the way I have seen, and not seen, rural environments and rural poverty, I become aware of a set of interlocking biases which have distorted my perception and diverted attention from the poorer people. Is

there, more generally, a tendency for those who live in urban areas (who are planners, bureaucrats and others) in developing countries, and those foreigners who come as "experts", consultants, donors, or workers in voluntary agencies, all alike to have these biases?

- (i) tarmac bias. A tendency to see what is next to tarmac roads. These run through the more prosperous regions near capital cities. The richer people have bought up land beside these roads and built their better houses there, while the poor are pushed back out of sight of the visiting rural development tourist.
- (ii) male and elite bias. A tendency to meet and talk with men rather than women, and those who are better off, more powerful and more articulate - the headman, the government official, the larger farmer.
- (iii) project bias. A tendency to go to special projects and special villages and to be given a special tour with a special guide. Can you go round the capitals of the world and find such special rural projects within an easy drive of the capital, along needless to say, good tarmac roads?
- (iv) seasonal bias. A tendency to avoid rural visits during the rains, at precisely the time when things are most difficult through food shortages, high food prices, the need to do agricultural work, high incidence of disease, and high indebtedness.

This is the time of year when - in the words of a Gambia village woman speaking to Margaret Haswell "Sometimes we are overcome by weeds through illness or accidents" (Haswell 1975:44). At this time, however, urban people are reluctant to travel, fearing to get stuck in their vehicles; and if they do visit, they see the activity of the relatively well-fed and fit in the fields rather than the inactivity of the underfed and sick in the villages. Rural visits tend to occur and impressions to be gained not in the rains but in the dry seasons, during and after harvest, when things are at their best.

- (v) snapshot bias. A situation is observed at one point in time. There is little sense of process, of trends of enrichment and impoverishment, of the changes in the distribution of wealth and productive assets which are so critical for levels of living.
- (vi) service bias. A tendency to visit buildings where services (for basic needs?) are being provided, and not to visit areas where there are no buildings and services; and to see those who are using the services and not those who are not using them.

These powerful built-in biases sustain a failure to appreciate the extent and nature of rural deprivation. They are likely to operate with any of us who visit a country and try to organise some rural visits. We are plugged into a central network which reaches out to places with which there is special contact from the centre. A voluntary agency has projects, or a government department has programmes, to which one is guided. Then, on the visit, things are seen to be happening. What one does not see are the places where nothing is happening, the bad times of year, the people who are left out, the non-users of services, the losers displaced by the project, the migrants who have left, the malnourished and sick who have died.

Central Issues of Rural Poverty

Our predispositions to accept comfortable formulas like basic needs, and our biased perceptions of rural poverty, make it easy, indeed tempting, to overlook the central issues of power, resources and livelihoods. It is easy for us not to notice the extent and nature of rural poverty, especially when many of the more deprived rural people are continuously being removed by death. It is easy to evade responsibility and place it elsewhere: for those of us from the richer countries to say "It is a problem of distribution and political will within the poorer countries"; and for those from the poorer countries to say "It is a problem of distribution between nations and of political will in the richer countries". And it is easy for all concerned to shift attention and priority to the provision of basic needs for all as a "solution" which avoids major sacrifices. While pressing on with providing services for basic needs may be thoroughly desirable, it is important to keep this in perspective; and to realise that many of the objectives of

such policies could be achieved more effectively through redistributing wealth. This has international and urban-rural dimensions; but it is easiest to demonstrate at the intra-rural level.

An example can be taken from Bangladesh. A careful study (Jannuzzi and Peach 1977) has estimated that about one third of rural households in Bangladesh are landless. The floods of 1974 destroyed many of the crops and famine followed. In one area, a survey (McCord 1976, cited in Chowdhury and Chen 1977:417) showed the 1975 crude death rate among landless families to be three times that of families with three or more acres of land. The differential increased to five times for children: the age-specific death rate of children aged 1-4 years was 86.5 per 1,000 among landless families compared with 17.5 per 1,000 among families with three or more acres of land. One can analyse this in terms of a failure to provide the basic needs of famine relief and medical care to the poorer groups. If these services had been adequate, it can be argued, the higher death rates would not have occurred. One might more cogently argue that if those who were landless had had land (redistributed from those with larger holdings), the death rate overall would have been dramatically lower, and many of those children who are now dead would instead be alive.

This supports a case for making livelihoods the priority objective. People with reliable and adequate incomes and food around the year are protected from the worst forms of seasonal stress and dependence. People with modest resources of capital in land, livestock or savings have a buffer against contingencies. People with even small amounts of money can do much for themselves and can exercise effective demand to gain access to services. Without adequate livelihoods - sustained, secure and adequate flows of income and food - services for health, education, water supplies and the like even if "provided" may not be accessible to many of the poorer people. But, as in the Bangladesh example, adequate livelihoods could often most effectively be achieved through a redistribution of assets, in most cases land through land reform. Obvious though this may be, it often looks as improbable that land will be redistributed as it is that the richer countries will voluntarily surrender some of their wealth and advantages to the poorer countries.

This reinforces the case for doing what can be done in the meantime. There are often other, albeit limited, ways, besides direct redistribution of land, in which some livelihoods can be created and others made more secure. Even if livelihoods remain the central objective, services for other basic needs are justified in their own right in terms of human welfare. And in the longer term they may help in two other ways. First, they may sometimes slow or prevent the ratchets of impoverishment, the irreversible downward shifts as poor people become poorer through sales of land or other assets, through indebtedness, or through physical disability. They can do this by preventing and curing disease, by easing physical burdens, and by relief in emergencies. Second, they may help to create the physical and psychological preconditions for improvement and reform, especially the preconditions for those who are disadvantaged to organise themselves and exercise more effective demand to get a fairer share of the cake.

Basic needs are, then, only red herrings if we allow them to be. Livelihoods are primary. Some paths to achieving adequate livelihoods have to be winding. Progress along those paths may be speeded and eased by the provision of services for health, education, water, transport and so on, with efforts to spread their benefits. But we should not deceive ourselves that these can directly solve the deeply rooted problems; for those problems concern not services but wealth and power.

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