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RURAL BASIC NEEDS: RED HERRINGS OR REAL HOPE? by DR. ROBERT  
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I've called this "Rural Basic Needs: Red Herrings or Real Hopes?" and I hope that those of you, who are engaged in work related to rural basic needs, will not be discouraged by what I'm going to say. I'm not meaning to be cynical. What I am going to try to do is to ask some questions and to try to be a little introspective about these questions of basic needs.

I'm going to start by asking what are basic needs, as defined by those, who use this expression, and then consider some of the arguments in favour of major initiatives focussing on basic needs, and then some arguments against it, and then consider some of the ways, in which we, as elite outsiders - I think that would refer to all of us in this room - perceive rural poverty and what we miss and then come to some sort of conclusion.

It's useful, in thinking about basic needs, which are now fashionable, to take a historical perspective about the flow of ideas and learning that there has been about development. There was the period, as we all know, in the 50s and 60s, when a GNP per caput seemed to be enough to go for, when there were ideas that trickled down that the poorer people would benefit from growth, and then, with disillusion in that, we had redistribution with growth, which lasted rather a short time, except that I suppose you could say that it's still to some extent in vogue, the idea that one wouldn't sacrifice growth but that there would be very conscious redistribution within developing countries, and this seems to have foundered, to some extent, on what people sum up as a lack of political will, and now we have 'basic needs', which seem to be

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more generally acceptable to a wider range of people, both in developed countries and in developing countries. One of my colleagues has talked about what he calls "the accelerating rate of slogan obsolescence" and one may wonder, with this accelerating rate, what the next slogans may be, and I shall say something about that at the end.

I want to emphasise that I think that what we're going through is a difficult and very painful learning process and one, in which introspection is becoming more and more important, to see what it is that we prefer to see and what we prefer not to see.

Let me start then, as I said, with basic human needs. Now, in the - I think I must sympathise with you, Mr. Secretary, in producing the brochure for this Conference, because you obviously had a space constraint, but your basic needs were Food, Health, Education and Housing, and, as the last speaker observed and we all know, in practice, the list of basic needs has been quite considerably extended. The original ILO document, I'll just read out the relevant section. This is in the document, The Employment, Growth and Basic Needs, which arose out of the World Employment Conference, which really launched this, and they say the following:

"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

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the people and individual freedoms." - and we haven't finished!  
"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."  
I don't think that most of us would wish to quarrel very seriously with that list, but what I think it suggests is that basic needs, as a concept or as a slogan, is extremely elastic and that, according to one's view of priorities, one can describe them as basic needs. For instance, from an aid point of view, a somewhat different view may be taken. Here is Maurice Williams, the Chairman of the OUCD Development Assistance Committee and he has a list here, in which he starts, not with the provision of services but with productivity, employment and income. 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." and he then goes on to talk about Food security, about health services, about lowering the rate of population growth and about investment in people.

In other words, it seems to me that we have to be rather careful about this term, basic needs, because it can mean different things to different people and almost anyone can use it to include whatever they happen to consider the priorities to be. And this, I think, raises the danger that it will incorporate the predispositions of observers to include those items, which are most convenient to themselves.

Now let me just start by considering what may be said very much in favour of a basic needs approach. First of all, quite clearly, the items, which have been mentioned, and the four which are mentioned on the brochure are extremely important and their provision is extremely important and nothing should detract from that as a basic

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point. A further advantage is that thinking about basic needs and the provision of basic needs does quite dramatically demonstrate the extent, to which they are not met at the present time, and the extent, to which they may not be met in the future. For example, thinking about education as a basic need, it seems that the proportion of children in developing countries, the absolute numbers of children in developing countries, between the ages of 5 to 14, who will not be at school, will go up quite dramatically. The figure for 1970 is 169 million and the estimate for 1985 is 375 million. In other words, over this 15 year period, a doubling in the numbers of children, who do not get any sort of primary education.

It also draws attention to the very rapid increases, which are anticipated in rural populations, even after assuming very considerable 3-fold or 4-fold increases over the 25-year period, 1975 to 2000, in urban populations, and, just to give an idea of the magnitude of this, let me read you some figures, which are derived from FAO estimates. They're probably ~~on the high side~~, a little bit on the high side, but the orders of magnitude are probably correct. These are after assuming very high levels of rural-urban migration over the period 1975 to 2000. The percentage increases, over the same 25-year period, of rural populations is expected to be as follows: Bangladesh: 85%; Ethiopia: 70%; Ghana: 53%; Honduras: 90%; India: 49%; Indonesia: 48%; Kenya: 109%, over doubling; Nepal: 75%; Nigeria: 82%; Pakistan: 64%; Phillipines: 55%; Rhodesia: 100%; Ruanda: 96%; Sudan: 89%; Tanzania: 107%; Thailand: 77%; Vietnam: 48%; Zaire: 44%, and so on.

If paying attention to basic needs encourages planners to think more seriously about these future rural populations, then it is in that respect a good thing.

Further benefits are on the donor side. One of the Development Assistance Committee reports regards basic needs as a useful

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propaganda device, and I quote: "A basic needs approach has a promising potential for reanimating public support for development aid", and, a further advantage in this respect is that focussing on basic needs may encourage donors to meet local costs to a greater extent than they had done before, because of the high local cost content in many basic needs programmes, and it may be that this emphasis on basic needs will have a beneficial effect on government programmes, that, in particular, it will attract attention more to areas, where there are larger concentrations of poorer people, the regions, which tend to get neglected, the periphery and the people at the margin. But perhaps one of the most important potential contributions of thinking about basic needs is that it raises some pretty fundamental questions. It raises questions about what are basic needs and it raises questions about how they can best be achieved, whether it is, indeed, through the provision of services or in other ways. And it does, I think, also, get us a little bit closer than did 'redistribution with growth' to try to see things through the eyes of the poorer rural people themselves, the people, whose basic needs we are generally presuming to identify. You see, the question is what are the conditions, in which basic needs can be satisfied.

That's on the positive side and I'm sure that there will be other arguments, which will come to your minds.

But I have used this expression "Red Herrings" and I want to explain why. Being negative like this can easily be misunderstood. It's rather like making a speech against motherhood, and I don't intend that, but I do think that there are some dangers in the focus on basic needs and that we should recognise these. I'm going to mention three:

The first is the danger of diverting attention very conveniently away from international issues. This is the major criticism, which representatives of third world countries make of the basic needs

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movement. They say that it's very convenient and comforting for people from rich countries, particularly the sort of neo-crypto-missionary, if I may use that phrase, a very convenient way of avoiding some extremely uncomfortable issues about the nature of inequality at an international level, and they point to the issues in the debate on the new international economic order in the north-south dialogue, from which 'basic needs' may divert us, and they talk about unequal exchange, about the need for markets for manufactured goods in rich countries, manufactured in poorer countries marketed in rich countries. They talk about the gross iniquities of the transfer price system of the multinationals, which soak up the surplus from developing countries and transfer it to rich countries, from which most of us in this room benefit, and other problems about the transfer of inappropriate technology and dependence generally.

And other people say that it's liable to divert our attention away from the enormous investment, internationally and nationally, in the arms industry, which takes at least half the research and development resources of the world at the present moment, and arms and the military together provide livelihoods in the world for something like 70 million people at the present time, many of them in the richer countries.

So there is a danger that, in thinking about basic needs - and I'm talking particularly now to those of us, who are from the richer countries - there's a danger that we are seeing the mote in the other man's eye and ignoring the beam in our own eye, that there is a great deal, which could be done through adjustments in international trade commodity agreements and so on, which could have a very substantial effect on rural poverty, and, if one wants an example of this, what happened in Kenya with the high coffee prices, which made a lot of us here grumble but really which made virtually no difference to our levels of living and may even have made some of us a

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little healthier, that what happened with the high coffee prices in some parts of Kenya, I have been told, was a counter-migration from the towns, because wages went up in rural areas and people went to those rural areas because the wages were high, and the wages were high because the international coffee price was high, because there was a greater transfer of wealth from people in rich countries to people in poor countries. So that's the first danger, I think, this sort of red herring away from these uncomfortable issues, which affect ourselves.

The second danger, I think, is attaching an exaggerated value to the provision of services. Now UNICEF, as we know, has developed an approach, which is called "Basic Services", and I don't wish to be thought to be saying that this is a bad thing or that the provision of services is a bad thing. To the contrary. But I think we should recognise that there's a model in our minds, when we talk about the provision of services. We have a top-down, centre-outwards welfare view. The approach is, in the words of one of my colleagues, Robert Casson, he calls the basic needs service approach, he calls it: COUNT, COST and SUPPLY. That is to say, you count the need, you cost it out and then you supply it in a centre-outwards sort of way. One should recognise that there are problems at the, as it were, the recipient end, which may be very serious indeed. There is a very serious question of who benefits from the provision of services. Services are often nominally free. People, who live for long periods in rural areas, and people, that is to say, outsiders of one sort or another, whether from within developing countries or outside, very frequently find that free services are not free. Joseph Senyonga, who has recently been working in Kenya, has ~~recently~~ written that the first few years of education are legally free. He says: "In fact, charges occur, which make it prohibitive for the poorest to send their children to school", and I suppose that it's very general that free primary education, in fact, is not free because of all

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sorts of charges, official and unofficial, which are levied on parents, and that this discriminates against the poor. And then there are many other stories of the sort of corruption, which goes on with famine relief, in which the famine relief food is sold, and so on, and I don't wish to go into these because these are fairly familiar.

But, further than this, there is the fact that the government staff, who are very often involved in the provision of services at the local level, for reasons, which are perfectly rational, when you look at their life styles, at their aspirations and at their incomes, often ally themselves with the local elite and often unofficially make money out of the provision of services in ways, which mean that the poorer people do not have effective access to them.

Now these, I suggest, are some of the disadvantages of the supply view in relation to services, the idea, which is important and necessary, but perhaps not enough, that these services are things, which have to be supplied to rural people. It's a top-down, centre-outwards view and there is also the question, which I'll come back to, of effective demand, of effective take-up on the part of the poorer people, and there is also the question of what the priorities of poorer rural people themselves really are. Are their priorities the provision of services or are they something else, and how often are they asked, and how often are their answers taken account of? The third danger in a basic needs service-oriented approach, is, I think, one that's worrying and difficult and which I don't feel I can deal with at all adequately, but it is the danger of diverting attention from the nature and the causes of rural poverty and away from solutions, which may be deeper and more permanent. Now, we're talking on the service side of basic needs. We're thinking, ~~and~~ I suppose, mainly in terms of government and voluntary agency activities. But do they - and, if so, to what extent - at all significantly go to the root of the problems of rural poverty?



If you ask why are there so many poor rural people in the world, maybe half of mankind, there are lots of answers. You can argue it historically, saying that it's a continuation of a condition of undevelopment, which hasn't somehow managed to get developed. Or you can be a dependency theorist and you can say that there's an active process of underdevelopment through the operations of international capital, penetration of capital, the operation of unequal exchange, the development of class systems and so on, that this is an active process, which is going on, which is impoverishing people. Or you can say that it's a question of urban bias, as one of my colleagues has got himself into a lot of controversy by doing, Michael Lipton. You can say that there's a tendency for urban areas to syphon off skills and resources and surplus from rural areas and this has a systematically impoverishing effect on the rural areas. You can say that it's a talents effect - to use Andrew Pearce's phrase, which is based on the Biblical parable of the talents - that rich people get richer and poor either stay as they are or get poorer, losing even that which he hath, a phenomenon, which we see extremely widely, especially in rural areas, in the third world. Or you can say that technology has got a great deal to do with it, inappropriate capital-intensive technology displacing labour, introduced from richer countries. Or you can say that it's all to do with land tenure and land exchanges and the way, in which poorer people are forced to sell out their land. Or some people would say that environmental degradation has got a great deal to do with it and that increasingly in third world countries we find concentrations of the poorer people extruded from areas of higher potential, moving into vulnerable areas on steep slopes and in open plains, where the rainfall is lower and where they're doing irreversible damage. Or, as there are some people in the case of the Sahel, who talk about long-term climatic change, and one can go on with these many different, not necessarily mutually exclusive at all, explana-

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tions of the nature and causes, and one can add to this the nature of tropical wet-dry seasonality, and the very widespread experience that the wet season is a period of acute crisis, both from a health point of view, from an energy-balance point of view - because food is short at precisely the time, when the demand for work is very high; food prices are high; vulnerability to disease is high, and the tendency to become indebted and dependent is very high at that time of year - and so on, and I haven't really mentioned the unequal distribution of productive assets among rural people, which, I wonder, may be pretty fundamental. And, when one goes through this long list, one can, I think, ask whether a basic needs service approach, however valuable in itself, may not be in danger of just improving palliatives, whether it may not be providing placebos for the consciences of donors and of government planners without really going to the root of the problem, and I would like to suggest that, although I believe that the work with these basic services should be expanded, that there are many good things about this movement, and I would not wish to discourage anyone.

I believe that a more central issue is an issue concerning livelihoods, concerning adequate and secure flows of food and income to poorer rural people, and that this is very closely linked with the access, which they have to the means of production.

Let me try to illustrate this from the case of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, according to a recent survey, about one third of all rural households are landless, and about half of all rural households are either landless or have half an acre or less. The actual proportion of the population is a bit lower than that. I don't wish to exaggerate, because poorer households tend to be smaller than richer households. Now a survey at a time of crisis in one part of rural Bangladesh has shown that the mortality rate among landless labourers was three times as high as that among those, who had three acres or more, and, if one looks at the particularly vulnerable 1-4

years old age group, the mortality rate in this particular area is 5 times as high among the landless families, as it was among the families with 3 acres or more. One can approach this by saying this was a failure to provide basic needs. You can say it was a question of providing food. It was a question of providing health services. If these could have been improved, this would not have happened. One might equally say that perhaps, if those who are landless had had land, if there'd been a redistribution, if those with three acres had had less and those with none had had more, perhaps the mortality rate would have been very considerably lower, and perhaps an approach on those lines might lead to a more stable shift in this relative deprivation than can be achieved only by the provision of basic services. It suggests also, I think, that we have to look very critically at this idea that the problem is just a problem of supply and to think also in terms of effective demand and effective take-up of services. There may have been problems of supply in this case. I expect there were, but I would also expect that there would have been very serious problems of access and of take-up at a time perhaps, when services were overloaded.

Should we, I wonder, look at ourselves and the way, in which we tend to perceive these problems? This is speculative and I don't know whether the cap fits. I think it fits me, but I wouldn't like to say whether it fits other people, but, when I look back on the way, in which I have perceived rural environments, rural poverty, I can see now a whole set of interlocking biases, which have distorted my perception and particularly distorted it away from the poorer rural people. Is there a tendency for those, who live in urban areas, who are planners, bureaucrats, and others, in developing countries, and those, who come from outside as experts or consultants or donors or people working in voluntary agencies, is there a tendency for them to have the following biases in their perceptions:

First of all, a tarmac bias, a tendency to see only what is next to

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a tarmac road, and we know already, from work done in Kenya, that there's a tendency for the richer people to concentrate their housing, to buy up land alongside the roads, so that one gets a very distorted view of the rural situation by driving along tarmac roads. The poorer people shift back out of sight, unseen by the visiting rural development tourist.

Is there a tendency for a bias towards visiting rich zones, which tend to be near the capital city? Is there a tendency on visits of this sort only to meet the rural elite, the headman, the government staff, the larger farmer? I have visited one farmer, who, at the end of my visit, presented me with a visitors' book to sign. Is there a tendency, a systematic tendency, not to meet women? Is there a systematic tendency to go to special projects and special villages and to be given a special *spiel*, when you arrive there, about how splendid it is, and can you, in fact, go round the capitals of third world countries and find these special projects within an easy day's drive of the capital, usually along a tarmac road, and do these systematically bias our perceptions, and is there a seasonal bias? Is it at precisely the worst time for poor rural people, which is during the rains with a high incidence of disease, with a high demand for work, with high food prices, with a high tendency to become indebted, with extreme vulnerability to an inability to provide labour, if someone is sick then. In the words of a villager in The Gambia, quoted by Margaret Haswell, she said: "Sometimes we are overcome by weeds through illness or accident", which sums up the extreme vulnerability at this time. If someone is ill, as they're very liable to be, if someone is sick, then they may be unable to weed and then they may lose most of the crop. But this is precisely the time, when people in urban areas, and even people in rural areas, visit least. They're worried about ruining their Landrovers. They're worried about getting stuck, and they tend not to visit. So, if they do visit, what they see is a lot of activity going on in the

fields and they're liable to be attracted by that and to go and see what is going on and not to visit the villages and the houses and the huts, which is where those, who are going without food, may be found and those, who are sick, at this particular time of year, and, for all these reasons, I am asking whether there are systematic biases, which tend to divert attention away from the nature and the extent of rural poverty, and whether this applies to, both to people from outside the country and to people within the country, and is there, on top of this, a supply bias in our perceptions, a bias towards seeing the good things, which have been done, in supply of services? If any of us in this room wanted to go to country X and said: I would like to make some rural visits, when I go to country X, because I want to find out what is really going on, would they be plugging in to a central network, which is a network, which links in with places where things are happening. Now, if you go to India and you say: I would like to visit rural India and find out what's going on, it is extremely unlikely that you will go to an area, where there is no programme. What you will do is you will go to Delhi and you will be plugged into a voluntary agency or a government organisation, which will systematically direct you to places where things are happening, and where those things are happening you can see that they are incontrovertibly good and desirable, and this may give you the impression that supply is the thing, and, indeed, supply is the thing to quite a considerable extent, but it's not the whole thing. What one does not see are the huge gaps, I mean, geographical gaps between the areas where things are going on, particularly, I think, with non-government organisations. So, what I'm asking here is whether we have a systematic built-in tendency not to see the central importance of the distribution of assets within rural areas because of the things that we go and see and the way, in which we see them, and whether opportunities to work, opportunities round the year independently of the seasons to have a secure supply of income and

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food may not be very much more important than we tend to suppose, and whether it may not very often be a precondition for the effective take-up of the services provided through the basic needs approach. So, coming to this question about RED HERRINGS OR REAL HOPE?, it seems to me that basic needs provided through services, health services, and so on, are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for achieving the objectives of reducing - hopefully, eventually eliminating - rural poverty and deprivation. In my view, the highest priority concerns incomes and livelihoods for the poorer rural people, because this seems to me to be a precondition of their being able to fend for themselves, to demand and to obtain the services, which are being provided. What I would suggest is that it's very important not to ignore the international issues, as I've said. It's very important not to ignore the issues of inequity within developing countries, and I suppose we all have a tendency to look at other people's problems. It's very easy for those of us from rich countries to say: It's a problem of distribution within poor countries., and it's very easy for people from poor countries to say: It's a problem of international distribution. It seems to me clearly that it's both, but that all of us should try to look very squarely at the balance between these two.

And, looking to the future, if we go beyond the basic needs approach, I wonder whether this question of livelihoods and the question of effective demand on the part of poorer rural people should not move in much more closely to the centre of the stage. The sort of situation, which can exist very frequently in many places unseen during the wet season, is a situation where there are shops scattered around with food in them and there are rural people, who cannot afford to eat, and this is something, which tends not to be seen, because those are not the rural people, who are visited, and it's very easy for all of us to ignore the seasonal nature, this

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invisible seasonal nature of rural poverty and deprivation. Now, if one looks at this from the point of view of livelihoods and the point of view of purchasing power, then it may be that some of these invisible problems can get solved by the poorer people themselves. If they have adequate money, they will solve their own problems through the resources, which they have.

And, finally, to end on a positive note, perhaps one of the values of the service supply approach to basic needs is that, in so far as it gets through to poorer rural people - and I think perhaps particularly on the health side - it may make it easier for them physically and psychologically and also socially and economically but particularly the first two, it may make it easier for them to organise themselves to exercise effective demand and to get a fairer share of the cake. Thank you.

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