
Editorial

Though the trajectories of rural development in countries adopting a socialist orientation differ considerably, all have been influenced by the view that collectivisation is a primary requirement of socialist agricultural development. Therefore, an examination of 'socialist agriculture' involves first of all an evaluation of the history, performance and advisability of collective agriculture, ie, some form of nationally organised system of joint organisation of production and distribution by the rural producers themselves, whether termed 'co-operative', 'collective farm' or 'commune'.

The advantages claimed for agricultural collectivisation are familiar. Economically, it speeds the growth of output and incomes by allowing more rational use of land and labour, providing an essential underpinning for the accumulation process, both local and national. The pooling of local material and human resources facilitates improvements in physical infrastructure as well as investment in human capital (general and specialised education, including agricultural science). Socially, collectivisation eliminates exploitative class relationships and prevents their re-emergence, alleviates absolute poverty by delivering basic welfare services and reduces unacceptably high levels of inequality between households, villages and regions. Equality within households is also increased, as the socialisation of land formerly owned and controlled by male household heads undermines patriarchal power and leads to improved social, economic and welfare conditions for women, children and young people. Politically it allows the integration of rural producers as active subjects rather than passive victims of the national development process with the collective as both an instrument of state-led mobilisation and a framework for democratic participation and grass-roots initiative.

Criticisms of collectivisation are equally forcefully voiced. The heavy hand of the state negates the potential advantages, wasting valuable economic resources through inefficient planning and irrational constraints on local autonomy. Collectives serve as a mystified legitimisation for higher-level decisions rather than as a vehicle for true democratic participation. Collective forms of agriculture are used as an instrument for state control of the rural areas and procurement of cheap agricultural products rather than as a context for speedy and egalitarian rural

development; male domination of household agriculture is speedily replaced by male domination of the new socialist institutions — state or collective, national or local.

Both of these broad viewpoints are represented in this collection in an attempt to deal with the complexity of the positive and negative aspects of collective agriculture both as ideal type and as historical reality.

There is considerable variation in national patterns of socialist agricultural change. Historically, collectivisation has played the greatest role in the transformation of peasant societies in revolutionary socialist states subjected to extreme forms of economic blockade in a cold or hot war context and pursuing a development strategy emphasising local and national self-reliance. The primary examples are the Soviet Union under Stalin, China under Mao, North Korea and North Vietnam. State planning and procurement, local self-sufficiency, mass mobilisation and moral incentives were among the watchwords of strategies of self-reliance.

In those Third World socialist countries which inherited a large plantation or settler farm sector and a high degree of external and/or urban market orientation, state farms have played a major role from the outset as in Cuba, and, more recently, southern Mozambique and southern Vietnam. In these cases, the most urgent socio-political demand was to maintain food supplies to the cities and output of 'cash crops' for external markets. In Cuba, for example, the sugar sector was converted into state farms, with the Soviet Union replacing the United States as the major buyer.

The pattern of rural settlement also differs dramatically, with far-reaching effects on the development of collective agriculture. The common pattern in Asia of long-established villages, often with traditions of corporate social, economic and political activities, greatly facilitated collectivisation. However, this impeded later government programmes for national economic integration because collective agriculture formed the institutional framework for revitalised localism and autarky. On the other hand, in African countries with scattered rural habitation, such as Tanzania (Ellis) and Mozambique, a campaign for resettling people into villages had to precede any attempt to introduce collective farming.

The performance of socialist agriculture (state farms and collectives) in both Eastern European and Third World contexts has been uneven, both between countries and between sectors and regions within countries. Certain countries, notably Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, North Korea and despite recent criticism, China, appear to have made considerable headway in combining economic rationality with social justice, performing well in terms of conventional economic indices and questions of distribution, employment, availability of basic welfare services and political participation. In certain cases — for example the Cuban sugar sector (Pollitt) — the putative economic advantages of large-scale industrialised production may have been realised. But, while declarations that socialist agriculture is a disaster area are much exaggerated, it would be equally untrue to paint agriculture as a star in the firmament of socialist transition. In fact, as Selden argues forcefully, the 'agrarian question' still remains unresolved and bedevils the socio-economic progress of all socialist societies to greater or lesser degrees. This is particularly worrisome for Third World socialist societies given the dominance of agriculture in their economies and its crucial importance as a precondition for rising living standards and a basis for any attempt at national industrialisation.

The problems facing agriculture in socialist countries are deep-rooted and multi-faceted. Sluggish and uneven growth rates in output and factor productivity have restrained aggregate income growth and frustrated plans for economic diversification, both internally and through their impact on trade flows and the balance of payments. Agricultural lag has prolonged the prevalence of absolute poverty and fuelled political discontent. These failures have concentrated the minds of governments and have led to a wide-ranging re-evaluation of the organisation of agriculture and to certain basic institutional reforms and policy changes.

Some of the problems of socialist agriculture stem from the history of the collective form and its integration into wider conceptions of socialist development, particularly but not exclusively the Marxist-Leninist variant. The Soviet model of collectivisation has exerted a tenacious influence in the Third World, perpetuating a pattern of political economy detrimental to rural development and impeding the exploration and legitimisation of alternative definitions of 'socialist transition' in agriculture. 'Orthodox' socialist development came to embody a strategy of rapid industrialisation which treated agriculture as a source of disposable surplus. Agriculture therefore received inadequate levels of

state investment and supplies of modern inputs, and collectives tended to become instruments of state control. Agriculture was the ugly duckling of socialist development, its backward features to be transformed ultimately into industrialised production as soon as technological levels permitted. Collectivisation itself was seen as a stage in the transition towards large-scale state-owned units, with former peasants and current collective farmers being transformed into one section of a nation-wide 'working class'.

Rethinking began early after Stalin's death and the decline of Soviet hegemony, spreading to the newer socialist countries in the 1960s and 1970s. At the strategic level, there have been unevenly successful attempts to strengthen the role of agriculture in official definitions of 'socialist construction', most notably the Maoist emphasis on 'agriculture as the base' and the Cuban decision to abandon an ill-conceived programme of rapid industrialisation after 1963. There has also been greater awareness of the crucial role of agriculture in earning foreign exchange. Recent trends toward detente have brought increased integration into international markets.

Though these dimensions of the reassessment process are important, and should be dealt with in any more comprehensive discussion of socialist agriculture, the contributions to this *Bulletin* concentrate on recent changes in systems of macro and micro-economic management and basic-level production processes, with special reference to three areas of policy change and institutional reform.

First, there have been attempts in many socialist countries, both in Eastern Europe and the Third World, to *change the politico-economic relationship between state agencies and basic units of agricultural production*. There has been greater recognition of the fact that agriculture is less susceptible to planning than industry, particularly to more traditional methods of comprehensive planning enforced by administrative controls. Overly heavy state intervention has posed problems in a wide variety of 'socialist' contexts, as case-studies of the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam and Tanzania demonstrate. In consequence, there has been limited — and as yet insufficient — movement towards a loosening of state controls over agriculture, the most striking recent example being China. The main directions are towards parametric rather than directive planning methods, towards greater reliance on market processes and price signals than on plan targets and procurement quotas, towards an improvement in price ratios in favour of agriculture, and towards greater autonomy for basic-level collective units of agricultural production.

Second, there has been a *reassessment of the nature of the collectivisation process and the viability of different*

collective forms. The dangers of hasty, partly coerced collectivisation have been increasingly emphasised and the desire for moving to ever 'higher' forms of collective production brought into question. Socialist economists and policy makers in China and Vietnam, for example, are now much more circumspect about the putative value of large-scale production in agriculture, whether this be in state farms or large collectives or communes. In Mozambique, the advisability of laying heavy emphasis on the state farm sector has been increasingly questioned. The trends here — again in a variety of different national contexts — have been towards the consolidation of smaller units rather than pushing a transition to higher socialist forms and, within collectives, towards various forms of decentralisation — to small groups, as in the Soviet 'link' system and Chinese or Vietnamese work-groups, or to households and individuals, like the Soviet 'hectarers' or Chinese and Vietnamese household contracts and 'responsibility systems'. The purposes are to allow reorganisation of agricultural processes in such a way as to be technically more efficient, socially more feasible in terms of specific requirements for the division of labour and more attractive in incentive terms to the individual labourer.

Third, there has been a *reorientation of the relationship between the collective and 'private', primarily household, sectors*. It is significant that the household sector is still an important component of most systems of socialist agriculture after several decades of rural transformation. As various contributors point out, it is vital for the production of certain foodstuffs and raw materials and provides a healthy proportion of rural incomes. In certain relatively advanced socialist countries, notably Poland and Yugoslavia, communist parties and socialised industries coexist — often uneasily — with predominantly private agriculture, and in African countries adopting socialist strategies, such as Tanzania, Ethiopia and Mozambique, communal reorganisation of agricultural production has made little headway as yet. Even in countries where collective agriculture is relatively long established, however, recent years have seen moves to revive or strengthen the role of the household in organising production. Dong devotes particular attention to the reasons for this reorganisation, concluding that the household sector is a historically unavoidable and developmentally desirable element of the rural reproduction process, a specific form of control over surplus labour which can and should be made complementary with the collective sector.

Most of the contributions to this issue suggest that the current period is one of re-assessment, adaptation and reform in socialist agricultural policy. While the economic results of certain reform experiments, such

as China and Vietnam, seem encouraging in terms of raising productivity and rural incomes, policy changes bring new problems in the wake, both economic (as Gray points out in the Chinese case) and social (Hazard and White). The dominance of the state in socialist political economy and its potential character as a conservative and self-interested agent also impose severe political and bureaucratic constraints on the degree of real reform possible, as Dyker argues in the Soviet case and Ellis and Bekele warn in the Tanzanian and Ethiopian cases.

Socialist agriculture thus remains a problematic area. The recent acceleration of institutional creativity and ideological flexibility give one some scope for optimism. It is certainly important to resist any hasty conclusions about the 'superiority' of non-socialist agriculture, based on crude assumptions about perennially 'individualistic' peasants or oversimplified comparisons of collective and private, socialist and capitalist production — Dong warns of the methodological pitfalls in such efforts. The dismal realities of the rural scene in many non-socialist Third World countries should also give one pause. Though specific national experiences of socialist agricultural development may be deficient, non-socialist development strategies may be equally or more problematic in developmental terms, as Green argues in his review of experiences in sub-Saharan Africa.

On the other hand, any simple assumptions about the self-evident 'superiority' of collective agriculture need to be questioned, as do wider socialist perceptions of the 'backwardness' of peasant economy, uncritical acceptance of Lenin's categories for analysing rural social structure, alarmist assumptions about the danger of household economy as a 'seedbed of capitalism' or overly rosy assessments of the participatory nature of collective institutions.

Looking to the future, it is important that socialist agriculture now has a history, an increasingly rich storehouse of experience and experimentation, successes and failures, upon which future policy makers can draw. It is to be hoped that Third World socialist regimes can succeed in freeing themselves from the shackles of the Soviet model, learn the positive and negative lessons of the past six decades, tailor the wide range of institutional alternatives for socialist organisation now available to their specific socio-economic conditions and abandon any exclusivist attitude to the experience of non-socialist countries. It is also crucial that the stifling power of state agencies be counter-balanced or outweighed by the mobilisation of grass-roots forces for autonomy and the process of policy making itself become more genuinely participatory.