

THE VILLAGE STUDIES PROGRAMME

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Seven out of ten people in poor countries depend on agriculture for a livelihood. That is well known, though not a lot is done about it: they enjoy about one-fifth of development investment and barely one-seventh of 'aid'. However, at least agriculture generates 'units of research' – the farm management study, the regional agro-economic survey, the river basin survey – which are analysed, compared and used to form policy. But can one understand farming without understanding the rural communities that practise, depend on, and constrain it? Their size, location, resource base, income-distribution, and 'culture' help to determine the type and the growth of the agriculture they practise. At least eight out of ten of the world's people live in rural communities. There have been many individual studies of these communities. Yet the Village Studies Programme is the only attempt so far to convert these studies into comparable, analysed 'units of research'.

Of course, not all rural communities are villages; there are also communities of transhumants, scattered farmsteads, etc. Villages, however, contain perhaps 80 per cent of the Third World's farmers. Unlike farms, villages are to some extent closed communities, in regard to economic, political and social transactions and hierarchies. Villages are definable; they *share* most – usually all – of half-a-dozen easily recognised features. To analyse the impact of the features that *differ* among villages, the first task of VSP was to formulate a 'master hypothesis' that would guide our collection, organisation and analysis of material.

This 'master hypothesis' is that, fairly independently of specific cultural situations and historical backgrounds, patterns of agricultural behaviour can be explained by reference to a few specific *village-level* variables, probably including man/land ratio, land distribution, and nearness to the city. It should be said at once (a) that, being a 'mould' in which to set particular explanatory hypotheses rather than a hypothesis in its own right, this last

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statement is plainly far too general to have explanatory force; (b) that, in its extreme cultural neutrality and lack of recognition of historical process, the ‘mould’ – like all protestations of total nonethnocentricity, an embodiment of ‘western liberal thinking’ – is bound to produce some hypotheses that the facts falsify.

Nevertheless, the ‘mould’ does produce several hypotheses consistent with the data: that the poorest *villages*, rather than the poorest *villagers*, are the main sources of migrant labour; that the ratio of subsistence to cash crops in the village, rather than in the farm, should be neither very high nor very low, to reduce the risk to family malnutrition; that villages with large numbers of hours worked per employee tend to have low participation rates;¹ and even that girls’ chances of survival are best if they live in villages with main crops amenable to female participation in most cultivating activities!

However, before such hypotheses could be tested, the studies over 2,000 intensive village surveys made since 1950 in poor countries – had to be collected and codified. It was a huge exercise, not in discovery – that was done by the patient, neglected fieldworkers of hundreds of research centres around the Third World – but in recovery. In dozens of countries – including Britain – monographs and theses, often untouched for years, were ‘unburied’ in remote departmental cupboards, borrowed from (often understandably dubious) librarians, and with the appropriate permissions, copied. In one centre, we commissioned the tabulation of long-abandoned data of crucial importance for the analysis of migration. Above all, we learned from the fieldworkers, authors, and research directors the facts without which assessment of the village surveys would have been impossible: duration of study and of residence in the village, supervision and organisation of work, checks on reliability of responses, and so on.

Collation of these responses, and comparison of them with the degree of apparent usefulness and reliability of the studies, led to certain methodological conclusions. Despite the logical truth that the number of ‘facts’ is infinite, there is an initial stage of village-study work in which fact-collecting – scholarly, preferably quantitative, journalism – is in order; but that stage quickly passes. Really

¹ The participation rate is the ratio of persons at work or seeking work, in a given year, to persons of ‘working age’ in that year.

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valuable village studies today usually test hypothesis, ideally in villages surveyed previously. Two months' residence is minimal, a year's is ideal; except for questions that are neither sensitive nor difficult, non-resident surveys based on occasional visits are seldom useful. Ideally, the fieldworker should be responsible for the write-up; rigid hierarchies, where the interviewer lacks incentives of career-structure, cash or publication prospects, are as unsuccessful in scholarly terms as in human ones. Above all, the purpose of a village survey needs to be specified in advance; the word 'purposive' does not suffice to do this. If it is desirable to feed the results into policymaking, the survey must be designed, and the results presented and disseminated, in ways that make this feasible. The practical implications of these and other matters are spelt out in I.D.S. Discussion Paper No. 10: M.P. Moore and M. Lipton, *The Methodology of Village Studies*. Methodological issues specific to certain sorts of village-level enquiry are taken up in two IDS monographs: S. Schofield, *The Methodology of Village Nutrition Studies* (which contrasts repetitive, short-period medical recording with the need to locate specific times, places and groups where nutritional deprivation prevails); and J. Connell and M. Lipton, *The Methodology of Village Labour Studies*.

The bibliographical work, necessary both for further research and to fulfil our goal of 'recovering' and making accessible the primary survey data, is described below by C. Lambert. Our subsequent work has included some special studies (M.P. Moore on dowry and bride-price, R. Laishley on causes and effects of inter-village differences in access to education), but has concentrated on three main areas: nutrition; labour utilisation and its links to migration; and village demography and its links to land use. The first two are dealt with below, in papers by S. Schofield and B. Dasgupta respectively. The last is the main focus of M.P. Moore's research, and aims – by comparing land-use patterns and age and sex structures among villages – to illuminate one of the oldest of unsettled development issues: does population change and growth determine patterns of land use or *vice versa*?

Villages do not do things – not many things, anyway. In Asia and Africa today, as in eighteenth-century Britain, villages are closer to the conflict, inequality and crudity portrayed by Crabbe than to the idyllic communitarianism of Goldsmith. VSP claims, not that villages

are splendid, but that they are important: that variations among them, in resource endowment and distribution, affect family and farm behaviour and welfare at least as much as variations among individual or regional economic entities. The method of *comparative micro-studies*, used in VSP, is perhaps a more hopeful way forward, in our attempts to understand development, than the alternatives: armchair theorising (which *is* necessary – I write this in an armchair) macro-analysis of nation-states, or the study of isolated individual microcosms of unknown representativeness or permanence. If the ‘comparative micro-studies’ method of VSP is held to produce useful results, should it not be applied to other micro-studies than those of villages: farm management studies, investigations of urban or suburban societies, and so on? Can one escape from the binds and boundaries of ‘Western’ academic disciplines, not only by the now-conventional ‘problem orientation’, but alternatively by multi-faceted comparisons of the *communities* in which decision-takers live?