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THE TARGETS AND UTILISATION OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

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1. RESEARCH IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS.

It often happens that University-based researchers and development administrators in government pursue entirely different paths with very little communication in regard to the targets of their endeavours. It is easy to say that a situation like this is undesirable and that research should inform the development process at all levels and stages. There is, however, a great danger in making facile statements about what should or should not be done in the development process. Professional moralising along these lines has probably done more harm than good in development generally.

Therefore I propose, firstly, to make a brief analysis of why cooperation between researchers and developers is often problematic. Only then will I proceed to make some very tentative suggestions about practical strategies.

1.1 Different kinds of development.

In order to talk sensibly about research in development we must first of all try to identify some major differences in types of development, in this case rural development. One can distinguish between:

a) area project development;
b) development programmes;
c) community-based development;
d) movement-based development;
e) generalised service-input based development and
f) national mobilisation programmes.

What the characteristics of these different types of development are, as I see them, will emerge in the discussion below. In development types a) and b), there is a very obvious and highly structured role for research. These are often projects and programmes undertaken by consultants or project staff, usually with "expatriate" funding and project staff membership. These projects and programmes usually commence with:

- needs and feasibility studies;
- resource assessments (soil types, infrastructure, skills availability, markets, etc.)
- pilot projects or programmes which are evaluated, using research.

After a project or programme has been underway for some time, project evaluation research is usually called for. Hence the role of research in these more structured development endeavours is more often than not fairly clearly defined. One may debate endlessly about how detailed or deep the research inputs should be, but the role of research and its particular place in and input into the schemes is not really at issue.

This is by no means the case with the development types c) and d) above. This type of development is more often than not initiated by voluntary organisations, like churches, mission establishments or political movements. The motivation for and interest in development is frequently heavily influenced by either religious or political ideology, and in the case of both there is a sense of "mission". This very sense of mission tends to cancel out awareness of any need for research preceding or during the development endeavour. Frequently the voluntary organisations, community groups or political parties adopt a particular development strategy which is compatible with their broader socio-political ideology and will rely on this strategy as an act of faith more than anything else. In this category of development, then, we will find the "cooperative movements", on the "left" and " entrepreneurship" schemes on the "right". (an example of the latter is the approach of McClelland emphasising the need to develop an achievement orientation.)

For the sake of completeness, we must add to this category those small community-based development schemes which arise around health facilities - clinics and hospitals. These are usually less ideologically motivated and hence there are perhaps more often opportunities for the introduction of research into the process than with other schemes as outlined above. As I will indicate presently, there are good reasons for conducting research as a basis for most kinds of development, and I certainly believe that the community based, organisation-based and movement-based development projects or programmes should ask for, or conduct, much more research than they generally do. However, in terms of thejr own characteristics, the group involved are often not free to accept research findings and could be somewhat embarassed by too close a scrutiny by researchers. I believe that we, as researchers, academics and administrators must accept that we are all groping for answers in the rural development enterprise, and be tolerant of people with particular development missions. There is one reason in particular why we should not attempt to straightjacket these types of projects;

this being the fact that the religious or political ideology often provides that essential element of grass-roots motivation, however irrational it may be. Therefore we should be cautious about suggesting that a research discipline be foisted on these groups or movements.

We come now to rural development type e). By general service input-based rural development I mean nothing more (or less) than the ongoing infrastructure and service network maintained in rural areas by the government or administration of a territory - the extension services, various kinds of educational inputs, concessions or subsidies for agricultural activity and also, very importantly, the taxation systems. This service infrastructure, by virtue of its scale and penetration, is a vitally important or potentially important part of the development process. While particular area projects or specialised programmes can often achieve remarkable successes, within their boundaries, and while many smaller community groups may prosper, we will simply not achieve the breakthrough in rural development on a pervasive scale which we all seek without the government service infrastructure. It is in this area of endeavour that rural development research has a vital role to play. It is in this area, however, that establishing a partnership between researcher and administrator is enormously difficult. These are the problems which I would like to discuss in greater detail in the next section.

Before proceeding with that discussion, however, a few words about category f): national mobilisation programmes. These often emanate from the particular policies of the party in power and usually reflect its ideological position. Obviously one of the best-known examples was Ujamaa in Tanzania. In South Africa itself we have the beginnings of a programme of similar order in the Inkatha-motivated programme of youth development and community-development in KwaZulu. Malawi has its Young Pioneers, Botswana the Youth Brigades and the like. Because these mobilisation programmes are associated with the governing party they often proceed within the infrastructure of the development service infrastructure. Therefore they can be included in the discussion which follows.

1.2 Research and the Governmental Development Service Infrastructure.

The origins of the modern government bureaucracy lay in the quest for rationality, logical and systematic classification and matching of needs and services and the attainment of objectivity and lack of prejudice and favouritism in the delivery of services. Theoretically, the modern bureaucracy is a perfect system, unasmuch as it is supposed to be a system perfectly geared to its objectives. Furthermore, theoretically it is attuned to change because the local officials, who are obviously spread over the entire territory, can become aware of changes in needs and community-level problems as they arise, inform the centrally situated bureaucratic desicion-makers, who will then adapt the system to meet the changing need.

Everyone knows that bureaucracies, particularly in the Third World and in Southern and South Africa, do not work like that. Some are certainly much better than others, but by and large we must accept that among the keynote problems of bureaucracies is their inflexibility and resistence to experimentation. These latter two features are what makes a research input problematic. We must not be arrogant, however, and start moralising about what bureaucracies should or should not do. Let us consider first some of the reasons why bureaucracies in the Third World and elsewhere, for that matter, fail to perform as reasonably logical and rational systems.

When an organisation like a bureaucracy is under-provided from the outset to supply services matching even the barest minimum level of needs, it must start developing an institutionalised avoidance of feedback. If a bureaucracy is faced with the sheer impossibility of seeing to the dipping of all cattle, eleminating the housing shortage, innoculating all dogs, finding places for all children who wish to attend school, it simply cannot respond to all the constant feedback that it is not doing its job. Anxiety is hightened within the bureaucracy and all sorts of defensive avoidance reactions become part of the normal pattern of administration. The typical bureaucracy, for the sake of its own morale, develops an intricate system of dealing only with that feedback which it can accommodate. Research, then, is a threat to bureaucracy because it can so easily represent unconstrined feedback. Researchers are often not sensitive to the anxiety of officials and do not cushion their feedback adequately or take account of the difficulties

in accepting results. I have been undertaking commissioned research for nearly eighteen years and I know from experience that not only government bureaucracies but other organisations resist what they have asked for when they receive their reports.

Another major problem with government bureaucracies is that the developmental and control functions are often intertwined. The same organisation that must pursue the tasks of rural development often has an instruction to watch for cannabis plantations, illegal overgrazing, pollution of water sources etc. etc., and may have to help solve boundary disputes of various kinds. The ethos of development and that of control are not compatible, and a considerable degree of role confusion occurs. To a bureaucrat with a control ethos (very prevalent in Africa because of the earlier effects of colonial administration), a more permissive, academically-based researcher often appears to have an outlook bordering on the delinquent.

At the risk of some oversimplication, if officials are faced with a problem of too many people with too many needs who are forever trying to break the rules in one way or another, they do not particularly wish to be faced with research reports on what the people want and require of them.

Taking this problem a step further, if the government has become involved in some national programme, politicians at high level have probably committed themselves to its success. They then prefer the more judicious feedback from their own officials rather than research conducted from outside.

Many of the government departments involved in the development field have their own internal research organisation. In my experience the social scientists in these organisations have much the same problems of acceptance as university-based researchers do. Since research is part of the general feedback process, it can easily be a threat to an over-stressed bureaucracy. This problem cannot be easily overcome, and academics must make the best use of the opportunities they have to undertake the research and present the findings in such a way as to promote the cause of research in the service bureaucracies.

I am certain that many people will react to what I have just said by quoting numerous instances of friendly and collaborative joint endeavours between universities and government departments. I can as well. Certainly, I have over-stereotyped the situation, but I have done so in order to identify the basic strain which, given over-stressed bureaucracies, must inevitably exist to some extent between the researcher and the official.

2. A Role for Social Research.

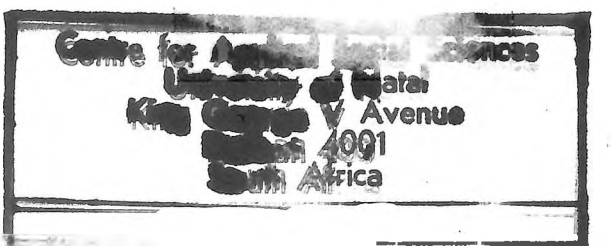
Given this background and these difficulties, what sort of role can one see for research in rural development. As I have already said, the issue is not quite as problematic in clearly-defined area project or specialised programme development. Therefore I will concentrate on the major problem as I see it - the pervasive, widely dispersed development challenge in subsistence areas in general. I will proceed to identify very briefly the kinds of research which I would see as necessary, making a basic subdivision between "diagnostic research" and "action research" which is part of the development process itself. I will try to mention some of the problems of acceptance and utilisation of research findings as I proceed through my list.

2.1 Diagnostic Research.

2.2.1 Needs Surveys.

Prominent among these are studies of Basic Needs. I will not describe these because there is a growing recognition of their utility and also a growing literature on the necessity of this type of research. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how any broad policy for rural development can be formulated without taking account of the pattern of basic needs in rural areas and the extent to which they are met.

Perhaps one point needs to be emphasised in regard to Basic Needs research, however, particularly in Southern Africa. Southern Africa has the characteristic feature of a contrast between highly-developed industrial and urban areas, with many (although not sufficient) work opportunities, and a rural subsistence sector which is very similar to that in Tanzania or



Malazi or Zambia. In some areas, like for example KwaZulu, the penetration of urban standards and tastes into the rural subsistence areas is enormous. In research conducted recently for the Buthelezi Commission, I found that the expectation of reward among people in rural KwaZulu is virtually the same as among people in urban, metropolitan KwaZulu (Durban and Pietermaritzburg). For example, when respondents were asked what wage they considered barely adequate to cover their needs for food, the means for rural and urban areas were R136 and R149 per month. The averages of the amounts quoted by respondents as the minimum wages needed to cover all needs did differ between rural and urban: R400 and R567. However, the difference was more a function of their existing level of wage than their rural-urban status. When both groups were given a hypothetical example of a migrant worker earning R120 p.m. in the city, and asked what minimum salary he would accept if he had the opportunity of working closer to home in the rural areas, the answers averaged out at just over R119 p.m. in both the urban and rural groups. From these snippets of evidence as well as general observations, it would not seem as if rural KwaZulu has a much lower level of material aspirations than urban KwaZulu.

KwaZulu may be exceptional due to the close juxtaposition of rural and urban areas, but it probably is pointing to what is happening all over Southern Africa, with the increasing impact and demonstration effect of the developed centres. In regard to Basic Needs research this means that if one were to adopt criteria for Basic Needs which assume some kind of rural stoicism and simplicity, one could end up being hugely irrelevant. It is difficult to know how far to go in introducing more elaborate Quality of Life concepts without sacrificing the essential feature of Basic Needs, but this is a ticklish problem which probably can only be resolved on the basis of empirical research.

To return to the problem of the utility of fundings, and particularly given the possibilities outlined above, we are likely to find that research results will substantially outstrip the capacity of the existing service infrastructure to meet the needs identified. It is probably most appropriate for researchers not to throw the whole lot at the heads of the administrators and planners, but, on the basis of research, to identify priorities for implementation, with practical suggestions for the phasing of programmes to meet the Basic Needs priorities.

2.1.2 Resource Surveys.

What I have in mind here is perhaps very similar to Basic Needs research. The emphasis is somewhat different, however. Resource surveys would describe and evaluate the available land resources, skills, staff, technology, infrastructure, organisation, services, capital, credit, opportunities and outlets, etc. relevant to postulated rural development activities and goals. As such they can be seen as a form of feasibility study. In regard to rural agricultural development, a careful research-based assessment of marketing opportunities would be an example of what I have called a Resource Survey. Such studies are frequently undertaken within government departments themselves and called by a variety of names.

A problem with this kind of study is that it is usually commissioned only when some or another rural development programme has been formulated, leaving little orno time for the missing elements in the array of resources to be introduced in time. It is perhaps appropriate for generalised Resource Surveys to accompany Basic Needs surveys at a very early stage in rural development planning.

2.1.3 Activity Surveys

Given the unquestioned difficulties in promoting rural development on a large and widespread scale, and the inevitable scarcity of resources for development, it is probably advisable for as much rural development planning as possible to concentrate on these areas in which some grass-roots initiative has already emerged spontaneously, and then to attempt to strengthen and expand the existing activity in development programmes. What might be quite useful in this regard are area surveys designed to identify producers of various kinds and to select case-studies for a more intensive examination of the particular circumstances, opportunities and constraints relevant to the particular production. I would rate such studies as particularly important because they could point to ways of removing impediments in the way of private, smallscale entrepeneurship, which is probably the most easily administered and cost-effective form of development imaginable. Here of course one is thinking particularly of strengthening the informal sector.

2.1.4 Motivation Studies

Human motivation is a form of resource, but requires an entirely different treatment from the Resource Surveys mentioned above. Particularly in poor, subsistence areas, the quality of motivation for development is generally very low. People tend to be fatalistic, short-run oriented in their aspirations, they lack confidence, and because of the struggle for survival, are often hostile to others which makes cooperation very difficult. Sometimes political or religious ideology helps to overcome these characteristics, but even then, the very poor are usually the last to become mobilised in ideological movements.

I am not suggesting that research in some miraculous way can yield answers to this problem of motivation. It can, however, identify voluntary organisation, leader figures, and activities in poor areas through which programmes of self-help can be introduced which might not produce immediate results in the form of production, but which will improve the morale in such communities so that rural development inputs will be better utilised.

2.1.5 General

There are more types of diagnostic studies which could be mentioned but these will probably suffice as examples of what is meant. Generally it is likely to be most effective if the planning of such research is undertaken in close consultation, if not in formal collaboration with, the officials who will be receiving the report. In reporting on these kinds of studies, the researcher must anticipate the development planning process and formulate suggestions and recommendations in appropriate "bite-size" chunks for utilizatior Above all, as I have already said, one should never simply present a cafeteria of problems and needs, but conduct research in such a way as to yield systematic priority ordering for development action.

2.2 Action Research.

This much abused term was once very respectable when it was introduced in the United States of America to describe research which accompanied group development and personnel development programmes.

It then came to be used more loosely by some radical researchers in community settings. Now it is sufficiently diffuse in meaning to be a convenient label for use in the context of this brief overview. Under this heading I would include:

2.2.1 Project Evaluation Studies.

I will not say anything about project evaluation and monitoring research since it is well-known as an adjunct to any properly constructed and planned development programme. Most sponsors these days insist on it as a condition for continuation of funding, which is all to the good. It is often intricate and there are a variety of available techniques. Perhaps more can be learned from a good evaluation of a failed project than no evaluation or a superficial evaluation of a successful project. It is particularly relevant to university researchers because it is essential that objective outsiders evaluate rural development projects, and the local university is an obvious choice to undertake the research.

2.2.2 Community Self-Surveys.

Where a section of a community, either through a voluntary organisation, or because of some crisis which brings members of a community together, indicates that it wishes to intervene in its own affairs in development, this is an appropriate time to suggest a Community Self-Survey. Very basically, this means assisting the relevant action group in the community to formulate the objectives of research as a first step in mounting a self-help development programme. The members themselves will conduct the fieldwork within their own areas. Ideally, if the action group is small, it should draw in other community members as they are contacted in the course of fieldwork, in ever-widening circles. The resulting group should, if possible, participate in the processing of the data and certainly should assist in the interpretation of results in group sessions. Hopefully, in the course of the exercise, certain leader-figures and initiators will have emerged. This makes it possible to identify an implementation and evaluation group for whatever projects arise out of the Community Self-Survey.

These types of group endeavours often fail, but the lessons from the failure can be beneficial to the community-leaders. In any event, the purpose of these exercises, as already mentioned, really precedes the development of production, and the central benefits are the improvement of community cohesion and morale. They are worth becoming involved in, whenever possible.

2.2.3 Regional Development Studies.

These types of studies are the particular field of regional planners and development economists, which is not my field at all. As I understand it, development plans are supposed to be a reconciliation of three different elements: the socio-economic goals, the regional infrastructure and resources (both human, physical and material) and the available development inputs in the form of funds, aid, staff, expertise and management. It seems to me that just as the researcher in general must try to involve the planner and administrator in his/her research, so the regional planner or development authority should involve the researcher in the planning excercise after the research has been done.

2.2.4 Field Experiments.

In such cases, the research team will in effect mount a pilot project in rural development with a view to varying the inputs systematically in order to assess the effect of various factors on the dependent variable, which is "development", as assessed in terms of a number of carefully formulated criteria. It is rare for academics to be given the opportunity to undertake Field Experiments in development, because it usually implies a suspension of many normal official functions in the experimental region. Field Experiments, however, are powerful tools for acquiring knowledge and insights. Here again, I would like to suggest that they be undertaken by panels composed jointly of academic researchers, planners and officials. In that way the fruits of the exercise will be maximised.

2.2.5 Community Centre Research.

Finally, in discussing Community Centre research, I would like to say that perhaps far too much development planning and administration is too centralised. The principle of Regional Development Centres, or even Local Development Centres, with the authority to undertake their own research, planning implementation and forms of cooperation with the community, has a great deal of merit.

In line with current thinking the aim should be that of Integrated Rural Development, in which the health, social, agricultural and even the legal services are brought under the umbrella of the Development Centre. The person heading the team could be a senior official with the role of Regional Director of Development and Services - something like a regional town clerk. He/she would have to have the authority to apply for modifications to other services not brought under the umbrella of the Centre, such as roads and public works. Such a Centre should function under a legitimate political authority in the form of a Regional Council of elected people, as well as local Chiefs and Headmen.

It is not my role to elaborate on the concept of Development Centres, but to say that all the forms of research I have discussed should be available to such a centre. Therefore there is a need in any integrated rural Development Centre for a Research Coordinator, with sufficient funds and linkages to mount appropriate diagnostic, experimental or evaluation studies at short notice.

This would probably represent the pinnacle of the integration of Social Research into the rural development process.