AGRICULTURE AND RURAL PROBLEMS

NORMAL PROFESSIONALISM AND THE EARLY PROJECT PROCESS:

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

by

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The early project process is dominated by engineers and economists, and preoccupations with infrastructure, budgets, schedules, and quantification. The way professionals and organisations think and operate biases the process against poor people. A new professionalism and a new paradigm start with people rather than things, and adaptive processes rather than blueprints. Practical implications for this approach include the need for calibre, commitment and continuity in field staff, restraint in funding, use of methods of rapid rural appraisal, and support for 'learning projects' without deadlines or targets.

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> 'The disturbing feature of most of these design and
> appraisal faults is that they are well-known, yet
> the evaluation literature is replete with
> complaints that they keep being repeated'.

> Cassen and Associates 1986 :174

Definitions and Scope

In this paper 'the early project process' refers in the
sense of World Bank terminology to identification,
preparation, analysis, and appraisal (Gittinger 1982:21-4),
and the equivalents to these activities as conducted by
other governmental, aid and NGO agencies. This early
project process presents many well known and well documented
weaknesses. Those listed by Cassen and Associates in the
quotation at the head of this paper refer to aid, and
include:

- overestimating the recipient's capacity for adminis-
  tration and implementation;

- imprecise forecasting of the effects on intended
  beneficiaries;

- neglect of maintenance and recurrent cost requirements
  for operation;

- lack of understanding of the human, social, and physical
  environment;

- lack of attention to relationships with other projects
  and programmes.

These are all important, and recent writing would add
others, especially inadequate participation in all stages of
the process by those intended to benefit (see eg Rondinelli
1983; Korten and Klauss 1984; Cernea 1985; Uphoff 1985).
The thesis of this paper is that these are not all; that to
correct them , however necessary, is not sufficient and that
in addition there are other factors and defects,which also
partly explain why mistakes go on being repeated. These are
associated with normal professionalism and with political
and bureaucratic pressures. 'Normal professionalism' here
means the thinking, values, methods and behaviour dominant
in professions, disciplines and departments. In this paper,
it refers especially to engineering and economics as the
professions and disciplines most influential in defining and

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executing the early project process. The argument is that measures can be taken to mitigate or avoid these factors and defects once they have been recognised.

Normal Professionalism

Normal professionalism has ingrained biases. These reflect 'core' or 'first' characteristics which contrast with others which are 'peripheral' or 'last' (Chambers 1983:171-9 and 1986). These show up, to take one illustration, in preferences for technology, as in Table 1.

Table 1   Preferences for Technology

Core or First	Peripheral or Last
large-scale	small-scale
capital-intensive	labour-intensive
inorganic	organic
market-linked	subsistence-linked
mechanical	human or animal-powered
developed in core	developed in periphery
'high' technology	'low' technology

The 'first' list is preferred by most normal professionals, while the 'last' list is usually closer to the resources and needs of poorer rural people.

There are many influences which reproduce and reinforce normal professionalism's bias against the poor. Some of these are evident in the relative status between and within professions and disciplines. High status, and the rewards of power and money that go with it, are associated with things more than people (or with people treated as things), with men more than women, with quantification more than qualitative assessment, and with specialisation more than general competence. Precision with things and numbers is valued more than participation with people. Much normal professionalism values hard data, measurement, calculations, the correct execution of established rules of analysis, and planned blueprints which promise control and certainty. Urban concerns are also preferred to rural, and industrial to agricultural. Interlocking, these tendencies mean that engineering has higher status and carries more weight than agronomy, and economics than sociology or social anthropology.

Professions and the Early Project Process

High normal professional status coincides with the professions and disciplines - engineering and economics - which are dominant in the early phases of the evolution of both institutions and projects.

With institutions, the outstanding example is the World Bank. Its original title - the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development - reflects the primacy of the physical in the word 'Reconstruction', which moreover precedes 'Development'. The early concentration of the Bank on infrastructure and industry is strikingly illustrated by John King's (1967) book Economic Development Projects and Their Appraisal which presented 30 cases, of which 17 were in electric power, 9 in transport, and 4 in industry. None was classified as agricultural, or concerned with human resources. Given this emphasis, it was natural that the World Bank should be dominated by engineers and economists, as were aid agencies generally.

With projects, too, a similar 'natural' dominance is normal. Most projects of any size, even when they are agricultural, start with hardware and construction - roads, houses, stores, dams and so on - requiring surveys, planning, blueprints, procurement, purchasing, scheduling, and construction of roads, houses, stores, dams and so on - all within the domain of engineers. These are preceded by financial estimates, economic assessments, and statistical justifications - the domain of economists. People, and the professions concerned with people, tend to come later. Although there have been changes since the days when Hamnett (1970) was recruited as a sociologist to solve the problems with people after the engineers had made the decisions about things, it is still true that in larger projects the "harder" professions set the style and the main agenda. Sociologists and social anthropologists start as poor relations. They are rather a nuisance. Their contributions often appear negative. They often explain why things should not be done, or should be done more slowly. They raise objections and slow down disbursements and implementation. The view of the higher status and more powerful professionals can be that those concerned with people should keep quiet until their time comes - later.

The law of prior bias then operates. This is that what comes first in a process sets patterns and takes most. The modes of operation of the blueprinting phase of engineering design and economic assessment, dealing with physical things, planning and estimates, carry over into implementation and operation. The style has been set, and remains, top-down, time-bound, and mechanistic. Thinking, values, methods and behaviour which fit and work with things are then applied later to people, with whom they fit and work less well.

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Bureaucratic and Political Pressures

Bureaucratic and political dynamics also reinforce 'first' and prior biases. Aid officials and host country officials are subject to pressures which are so prevalent and well-known as to be commonplace. These are

- to produce a portfolio of projects quickly;
- to spend budgets, especially aid budgets, by deadlines;
- to include capital goods from donor countries as part of projects;
- to reduce staff numbers (as retrenching donor governments slim their aid agencies and host country bureaucracies are cut back in structural readjustment)

In aid agencies, these pressures favour fewer, larger projects with more 'first' characteristics, since these enable fewer aid staff to spend more, to spend it faster, and to spend more of it in the donor countries. Normal professionalism is then reinforced and normal professionals rewarded. Engineers and economists are seen to have most to contribute to the expeditious implementation of such projects, while soft social scientists asking awkward questions complicate things and slow projects down. Engineers and economists remain on top. Those primarily concerned with people, especially the poorer people, remain marginal.

In many agencies, things have changed and continue to change. I do not undervalue the enormous professional contributions of engineers or economists, nor suggest that they always neglect people. The point I am making, though, is that there are systemic forces - in normal professionalism, in the sequence of activities in the project process, and in the dynamics of aid bureaucracy - which favour the 'first' and neglect the 'last'.

Project Process Pathology

The theory of project identification and of other early project activities is that they are subject to systematic and rigorous procedures. Enormous efforts have been made to develop and improve these, especially their mathematical components. In the real world, however, major defects remain, and separately or combined, reduce benefits to the poorer. Four are easily overlooked: irreversibility of commitment; anti-poor bias in methodology; the 'cooking' of cost-benefit analysis; and additive procedures.

i. irreversibility of commitment

With medium and large donor-supported projects, commitment to go ahead is often irreversible at an early stage. Whatever the theory in the textbooks, in reality the

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decision is 'pre-empted' rather than 'taken' because of a slide of political commitment making it embarrassing for a donor to withdraw. This can occur long before the later stages of preparation, analysis and appraisal. It would be worth investigating whether it is true that the larger the project, the earlier the commitment becomes irreversible. 'Commitment' here refers not to any formal agreement or signing of documents, but to the point at which withdrawal becomes politically difficult to contemplate. There are cases, like the development of the New Lands in Egypt, or the railway to the North in Burkina Faso, where Governments have pressed ahead with little or no donor support; but more common are situations in which donors are hooked early on and then cannot escape even if they want to. Two examples from British aid are the announcement by the then Prime Minister, James Callaghan, on a visit to India, of a £30 million fertiliser aid project for which there had been no serious appraisal, and the Victoria dam in Sri Lanka, the largest British foreign aid project ever, where donors were in competition and so in a hurry to become committed. Whether these have proved good projects is not the point here. The point is that for political reasons, including in those days the need to spend the aid budget, commitment to go ahead was deep at an early stage, and largely independent of the formal project process which then followed.

The irreversibility of such commitments, whether by donors or by host governments, can even resist adverse technical reports. Commitment in Kenya to irrigation on the lower Tana was probably politically irreversible for the Kenya Government as early as the mid-1960s, despite negative appraisals by a succession of technical missions. It gave birth to the Bura Irrigation Project which must be a leading contender for the strongly contested prize for the least economic irrigation scheme in sub-Saharan Africa; and not only is the project grossly uneconomic, but those who were meant to benefit have, despite huge costs, done badly (Moris 1987: 103-6). Bad projects rarely benefit the poor in the long term; and preventing them requires early action to slow or stop the slide into commitment.

ii. the anti-poor bias in methodology

Among the many biases in normal professionalism, those which are methodological are among the least recognised. In project identification, the most important events usually occur in the early stages, but methodologically these are the least determinate, the least observed, and the least written about. For these reasons, identification in the narrow sense of having and lodging the idea of a project is often, ex post, a black box. And ex ante it is easily influenced by those with special interests or local power. The neglect of the identification phase is illustrated in J. Price Gittinger's classic and magisterial Economic Analysis of Agricultural Projects (1982), which devotes only one page

out of 443 (not including the bibliography and glossary-index) to 'Identification'. To be fair, one page of Gittinger contains more words than most books. It is, though, the content as well as the length of the treatment that matters. The page starts:

> The first stage in the (project) cycle is to find potential projects. There are many, many sources from which suggestions may come. The most common will be well-informed technical specialists and local leaders. While performing their professional duties, technical specialists will have identified many areas where they feel new investment might be profitable. Local leaders will generally have a number of suggestions about where investment might be carried out ...
>
> (ibid.21)

Other sources of suggestions include proposals to extend existing programmes, and needs for certain agricultural products. For all these, though, Gittinger says little about the process and procedures. These are, it seems, most commonly left open to the normal biases of professionals and to the suggestions of the members of local elites. Such an approach appears unlikely to generate many projects which give priority to the expressed needs and priorities of the poorer rural people.

iii.   the 'home economics' of cost-benefit analysis

Such biases in identification are liable to be confirmed by early irreversible commitment. But in theory they should be mitigated by cost-benefit analysis (CBA).

Certainly, in choosing between alternatives for components of a project, CBA is useful. Sensitivity analysis is a useful aid to decision-making. Economic analysis can be used effectively for damage limitation (Harvey 1986: 448-50). It can also be used to prevent bad projects if they can be caught early enough.

But the defects of CBA are several. Partly it is the seductive attraction of the single number - a benefit-cost ratio, or an internal rate of return - which is easily given more weight than it deserves; Gittinger himself warns that economic and financial measures are only tools of decision-making and not substitutes for judgement. Partly it is that discounting the future supports decisions which are unsound for the environment and for future generations. Especially where future livelihoods are likely to be more vulnerable, and people likely to be poorer, there is a case for discounting in reverse, valuing the future more, not less, than the present. Partly, too, CBA has difficulty accounting for losers from development projects, and often they are the poorer, and unseen and unheard.

Finally, CBA appears to be what it is rarely, if at all: an objective scientific procedure impartially carried out. For in its practice it is more art than science, and grey art at that. Irreversibility of commitment, political pressures, and personal judgements of the worth of a project, combine to encourage and legitimate a practice unlikely to feature in textbooks, manuals, or courses such as those of the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank. This is working cost-benefit analysis backwards, a skill transmitted, one may surmise through craft apprenticeship in economists' offices, or reinvented under stress. In this reversed process, a judgement is first made about what Internal Rate of Return (IRR) is appropriate, and then assumptions - about future prices, rates of implementation, rates of adoption of practices by farmers and so on - are derived so as to generate the IRR required. The judgement on which the IRR was first assessed may have been sound. It may also have been politically determined. When political commitment is already irreversible, and a certain IRR is needed for a project to be accepted bureaucratically, then not to follow such a practice of 'cooking' may combine political embarrassment and conflict with dismal prospects for the analyst's career. It may even be that the larger and more expensive the project, the more the IRR is likely to be an artefact of political realities, the hypothesis being that the bigger the cake, the more thorough the cooking.

iv.   <u>additive procedures</u>

One response to defects and criticisms such as these has been to reorganise and add to the procedures of the early project process. In this USAID has been in the lead. New appraisal criteria have been agreed and incorporated in required procedures. At first sight these look good. USAID's social soundness analysis, for example, raises questions about people which could otherwise be overlooked. But the succession of additional considerations - who gains and who loses, women, and now the environment - contrasts and conflicts with cutbacks in aid agency staff. When fewer people have to do more they either work harder, put the work out, change their methods, take longer, or do less and do it worse. The last is the greatest danger. Just as adding another member to a multidisciplinary team can reduce communication in the team, so adding another criterion or procedure in the early project stages can lead to superficiality and tokenism on the part of those who are overworked. It can then appear more important to be able to show that, women's interests say, have been investigated and reported on, than that the report on women's interests is correct and has actually been acted upon. Unless aid agencies have staff with time, capacity and authority to act on adverse reports, they are liable to culminate as entries in files which show that the required study was completed

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and the report duly received. Consummation is then confined to a tick in a box. With procedures, it is but a short step from the complex to the cosmetic.

Large Projects: Prevention Often Better than Cure

These four defects - irreversibility of commitment, the anti-poor bias in methodology, the cooking of cost-benefit analysis, and additive procedures - bear on the strategic question of choice of size of project.

The current fashion of condemning large projects can go too far. It is true that large projects are sought after by host governments and donors alike for well-known less than altruistic reasons such as prestige, patronage, personal ambition, commercial interests, corruption and the need to expend budgets. But such motives should be separated from the question whether a project is or was worth doing. Critics of existing large projects in the rural sector, such as big dams, hydroelectric schemes, major road construction, and processing factories, should reflect, case by case, on whether they are saying that a given project could and should have been implemented better, or that it should not have been done at all. Faced with the latter question, negative social scientists will sometimes crumble. Who, for example, and despite its adverse effects, would suggest that it would have been better for the poor of Egypt if the Aswan dam had not been built? Each case, ex ante as well as ex post, deserves to be examined on its merits. A final argument in favour of large projects could be that with understaffed aid agencies, the lower administrative demands made in total by fewer larger projects would improve the chances that the additive procedures designed to protect and favour the poor, women, and the environment would be well implemented and would bite.

That said, much evidence and argument makes large projects look less attractive than in the past. They have always been vulnerable to major and expensive problems. When Albert Hirschman in the 1960s studied 11 large World Bank projects, he feared a biased sample because of the high standards insisted on by the Bank, but reported "Fortunately, (at least for my research) I found, upon looking more closely, that not one of the projects I had selected had been free from serious problems" (1967:1). Nor was the "creativity" he found being mustered to overcome problems costless. Two decades later, many of the better big projects have already been identified and implemented. Those that remain are less attractive, riskier, and on worse sites, and often involve more losers in populations that would be harmed or displaced. Adverse environmental effects are also better understood and more predictable. To these points can now be added the first three defects discussed above - irreversibility of commitment, the anti-poor bias in

methodology, and the misuse of cost-benefit analysis. Big is not always or necessarily bad. But it is now more often bad than it used to be.

In consequence, we are moving into a phase in which self-restraint and new skills are increasingly needed to question large projects and seek alternatives to them. How to do this is a subject for research, public information, and lobbying. One of the healthiest developments of recent years has been the emergence of international networks of activist NGOs committed to the rights of peripheral people who stand to lose from projects. Another has been the tough line taken within and by the World Bank over the rights and welfare of poor people displaced by dams, to the extent that this has been effective. But there still remain questions of how host and donor agencies, staff and politicians can learn to prevent and abstain from bad large projects. This subject deserves study in its own right. For the present, four suggestions are:

i. to identify and count the losers from a project and give their welfare a high weighting;

ii. to seek ways to break large projects into smaller units. This is more often possible than realised. For example, several small dams along a river, with lift irrigation from their reservoirs, can quite often substitute for one large dam with gravity irrigation;

iii. to avoid premature political commitment by keeping a low profile, emphasising political risks and costs, and avoiding early high-level meetings of donor and host political leaders;

iv. to prefer consultants who are willing and able to give a proposal the thumbs down, and reward major negative decisions with public recognition (a place in the honours list for recommending against the big dam and so losing the lucrative contract for supervising implementation).

The New Paradigm and the New Professionalism

The prevention of bad big projects can be compensated by the promotion of good small ones. Despite the power and inertia of normal professionalism, the past two decades have witnessed shifts in the values, procedures and even balance of power within and between professions and organisations engaged with development. Donor organisations now seek to support more small projects identified and implemented by NGOs. More attention is given to people, especially women and others who are disadvantaged. It is not so much that the numbers of sociologists and social anthropologists in host governments and aid agencies has increased: they are still very few indeed (astonishingly, ODA still has only two Social Development Advisers). It is rather that new ways of

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thinking and new values have diffused and been adopted and internalised by many others in other disciplines and professions.

These changes embody parts of the new paradigm and the new professionalism of development which have been emerging (Jamieson 1987; Chambers 1986). Key elements in these are reversals of the normal - to put people before things, to decentralise, to enable and empower the poorer and weaker, to value and work on what matters to them, and to learn from clients rather than always to teach them.

The very nature of the new paradigm makes its examples inconspicuous and easy to overlook or undervalue. Decentralised small-scale activities are less visible than centralised infrastructure. Social development is harder to see or photograph than physical development. Evolutionary change is less noticed than revolutionary. The enhanced capability of a resource-poor farmer to experiment and adapt is not as evident as a new pump or tractor. Perhaps because of its poor visibility, the paradigm is already more prevalent than some observers realise.

With projects and other development initiatives, one of the clearest expressions of the new paradigm and professionalism is the learning process approach (Korten 1980, 1984). Of this, many recent examples could be given. One is the OXFAM-supported Yatenga Project in Burkina Faso which followed two failures - a multi-million dollar soil conservation fiasco, and a small-scale attempt to introduce agroforestry methods from Israel. In contrast with these, a highly successful water harvesting approach was finally evolved mainly from indigenous technology in a way which met the priorities of the people (Reij et al 1987; Harrison 1987). Another is the Karnataka Social Forestry Project, supported by ODA and the World Bank. This has evolved continuously, learning from mistakes and criticism, and moving towards bureaucratic reorientation and decentralised micro-level planning. Yet another is the ODA-supported Integrated Rural Development Programme in Zambia (Mellors 1987) which began in a technical blueprint mode and evolved into decentralised institution building, with an approach and procedures designed to encourage and empower local authorities. These examples show that the learning process approach is not limited, as some suppose, to NGOs. To the contrary, some donor agencies have moved towards it, as has ODA with its procedure of Planning by Successive Approximation (PBSA), used in the Karnataka and Zambia projects.

The blueprint and learning process modes have different implications for the early project process. This can be seen by examining their contrasts as in Table 2.

Table 2:   The Blueprint and Learning Process Approaches in Rural Development Contrasted

	Blueprint	Learning Process
idea originates in	capital city	village
first steps	data collection and plan	awareness and action
design	static, by experts	evolving, people involved
supporting organisation	existing, or built top down	built bottom-up, with lateral spread
main resources	central funds and technicians	local people and their assets
staff development	classroom, didactic	field-based action learning
implementation	rapid, widespread	gradual, local, at people's pace
management focus	spending budgets, completing projects on time	sustained improvement and performance
content of action	standardised	varied
communication	vertical: orders down, reports up	lateral: mutual learning and sharing experience
leadership	positional, changing	personal, sustained
evaluation	external, intermittent	internal, continuous
error	buried	embraced
effects	dependency-creating	empowering
associated with	normal professionalism	new professionalism

Source: Chambers 1986:23, adapted from David Korten personal communications.

The learning process approach changes the early stages of a project. Project identification is no longer a discrete activity; it is continuous. In the blueprint mode, identification is a black, or at best grey, box, preceding the main procedures where the searchlights shine. In the learning process mode, identification is not a one-shot event, but an adaptive sequence of finding out what best to do.

Although they are presented here as dichotomies, the blueprint and learning process approaches can be and have been combined in many ways (see e.g. Rondinelli 1983) with titles such as planning by successive approximation, or the structured flexibility approach. Quite often such combinations will be appropriate. But the pull of normal professionalism towards blueprinting is so strong that without sustained reversals, the learning process pole has too little weight. No apology is needed for stressing it here. For better development actions, it should usually be much more to the fore.

Practical Implications

To implement the learning process approach on any scale has many requirements and implications. Three stand out:

i. calibre, commitment and continuity of field staff

The top priority is to enhance the calibre, commitment and continuity of field staff, and increase their numbers. They may be nationals or foreigners, and in Government or in NGOs, but unless they are of high calibre, committed, and able to stay for a matter of years in the same place, they are unlikely to nurture effective learning processes, involving as these do enabling, empowering, and institutional development. To quote a recent study:

> Two things are quite clear: there can be no successful development scheme without an efficient institution to push it through, and behind every efficient institution we will almost invariably find - at least in its early stages - an individual who is both an entrepreneur and an innovator.

(Lecomte 1986: 116)

The learning process is staff-intensive, and requires good staff.

ii. restraint in funding

Two much money, or money too soon, or budgets which have to be spent by given dates, drive field staff into blueprinting. The budget which has to be spent in two weeks before the end of the financial year has to be converted

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into things, for example cement, which points to physical construction not human process. Large budgets mean buildings and machinery rather than self-help and self-reliance. Large sums thrust on NGOs tempt them to induce participation and to achieve early results through subsidies. These then prevent learning from participants, because poor people will undertake work in which they are not interested if they are paid or fed for it. Big budgets hinder learning.

iii. <u>rapid appraisal</u>

Continuous monitoring, learning, adapting, and appraising require their own timely and cost-effective methods. Rapid rural appraisal (RRA) now has a repertoire of techniques which makes it versatile, both for individuals and for teams. The International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal held at Khon Kaen University in September 1985 (Khon Kaen University 1987) concluded, moreover, that RRA was not a second best, but to the contrary was often, when well conducted, superior to other known approaches. Its further development and widespread adoption are impeded by conservative normal professionalism, but it has shown its effectiveness in project identification (see e.g. Harvey and Potten 1987). Its application for enabling rural people to analyse their condition and identify their own projects and priorities deserves further development.

RRA has a crucial part to play in the early project process. Given the early political irreversibility of commitment to many medium and large projects, rapid assessments in the very early stages can matter more than later longer studies and surveys. Such RRAs can steer projects before they are set in direction and form. They can also provide early warnings and help prevent bad projects. It reflects on the normal professionalism of aid agencies that they have not applied RRA methods more systematically in the early project process, and have left their development more to universities and NGOs.

<u>Learning Projects</u>'

Dissatisfaction with the dominance of the project approach to development has provoked a search for complements or alternatives. A working group at Cornell University has christened a disparate family of these as "paraprojects" (Uphoff 1988). The family consists of:

- local capacity-building mini-projects
- removing deterrents or lack of incentive
- appropriate technology-cum-organisation
- planning and management improvement
- savings-and-credit systems
- horizontal diffusion

- campaigns
- bureaucratic reorientation
- research and action programmes

Uphoff identifies three general features of these: although funds are in most cases an important outside contribution, they are generally more labour-intensive than capital-intensive; they mobilise local resources including ideas and management skills; and their goals are qualitative change with quantum shifts in activity and outcome. The list serves to underline the range of alternatives to normal projects. Not all paraprojects, as listed here by type, are necessarily incompatible with a normal project approach; but they do show the importance of ideas, institutions, and the learning process: for initially at least, most of them would be difficult to blueprint.

Crosscutting some of these types of paraproject is an approach which follows from the key factors of calibre, commitment and continuity of field staff, restraint in funding, and adaptive rapid appraisal. This can be described as the learning project. In an ideal type of learning project, funds are available but no fixed capital budget has to be spent, and there is no pressure on staff to spend or to spend more; there are no targets for physical achievements; there is no preference for visible as against invisible change. These reversals of the normal led me in an earlier version of this paper to use the term 'anti-project', but 'learning project' better captures the positive thrust of the approach.

The essence of the learning project is good staff put in the field and sustained for periods of months or, more likely, years, exploring and learning from and with local people and trying to see how better they can gain what they want and need. With a learning project, it can take many months, even years, before substantial money should be spent, if it should be spent at all. Michael Shulz of Euro Action Accord spent 20 months in Port Sudan before making the first loan of a credit programme, a delay which caused consternation in headquarters: yet the programme was later hailed as an outstanding success. But the word 'yet' still reflects the old mindset. The success was not in spite of, but because of, the long gestation, the long identification, during which understanding and mutual confidence built up. Without the long, slow, exploratory start, it is unlikely that the second 20 months would have seen, as they did, no less than 1,500 small loan projects designed. Perhaps one of the great lessons in rural development is that 'identification', in its hurried and obscure normal professional form, is much of the problem, and patient and continuous learning and evaluation in the field are much of the solution. In this perspective, the learning project is not so much an alternative to the normal project as a different way of starting and continuing.

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For the future, three needs stand out. The first is to see where a learning project approach has the highest pay-offs. It may be with the diverse and complex farming systems of the resource-poor farming areas of the world, which are now such a priority for agricultural research. In these, new farming systems can require multiple innovation both simultaneously and over time, as was the case at Yatenga. Examples of such innovations are water harvesting and agroforestry. The second need is to develop institutions which can support learning projects with the necessary patience and flexibility. This entails changing rules and expectations. While NGOs have some advantage here, there is no reason why Governments and aid agencies should not do likewise. They will need, however, to protect learning project staff from pressures to spend funds. One device to this end is to draw off the pressure to spend by supporting parallel normal projects to absorb the funds. The third need is to train, inspire, encourage and reward the new professionals who make good learning project staff. That is difficult, but not impossible. Identifying a learning project means finding staff who are new professionals, and then supporting them in their extended local-level work, accepting that this may or may not later lead to the identification of normal projects. A start can be made by finding those who are already on the ground. For new professionals do not have to be invented. They are already working in many places, and increasingly support each other.

Concluding

There are further implications for Governments, aid agencies, and NGOs. To reduce the pressure to disburse funds, other uses for aid budgets must be found: debt relief and foreign exchange support are obvious candidates. Some necessary big projects can also help. At the same time, more staff are demanded by the new approach. Too many politicians and managers hold the peculiar view, perhaps traceable to adolescent readings of Parkinson's Law, that it is always cost-effective to reduce staff, described pejoratively as 'administrative overheads'. But reducing staff usually makes those who remain spend more time in offices and with paper, keeping them further from their poorer clients, and preventing learning. Many NGOs now know better. Much good rural development from which the poorer gain is staff-intensive, and the intensity has to feed right back into the donor agency. SIDA is being forced to cut its staff while its budget is raised. This perversity will probably reduce aid effectiveness. One defensive, if schizoid, device, might be to divide donor agencies into two - a big spending division with normal projects, and a high budget to staff ratio, and a learning project division with a low budget to staff ratio. In any case, more, not fewer, donor agency staff are needed by the new approach both in their headquarters and in host countries where they can

increasingly be host country nationals. And Southern Governments and Southern NGOs also themselves need more continuity in their field staff.

Finally, a step for all concerned, of whatever profession, discipline or nationality, is to recognise and offset the imprint in their minds of normal professionalism and normal project identification. When people are put first, and the poorer rural people first of all, it is more they who do the identifying and who set the priorities. At this frontier of the early project process, the question is not just identification _for_ whom, but identification _by_ whom. Some big projects will always be worthwhile, but one lesson of experience in rural development is that many successes start small and slowly and evolve through participation and mutual learning, with and by committed new professionals. Structures, policies and procedures can and should be modified to release them from pressures to spend and to give them freedom to explore and learn. The challenge is also to find, train and support many more of them. For the key to improving the early project process is not just changes in management, needed though they are, but more pointedly, better people in the field.

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