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RURAL INSTITUTIONS: FIVE PRACTICAL PROPOSALS

This note sets out five hopefully practical ways in which UK aid can be directed to help the poorest rural people.

The underlying analysis is as follows. There are persistent difficulties in perceiving and understanding poor rural people and in designing and implementing programmes from which they will benefit in ways which they want. Effective programmes are often staff-intensive, patiently implemented, and of low visibility. Some of the most lasting and important changes for poor rural people concern attitudes, access to resources, technology and services, and informal organisation and leadership. Nothing in this note should detract from the priority for redistributive land reform in several countries. But in addition, some of the other changes which can most effectively help the poor are likely to:

- (i) be innovative
- (ii) be replicable with low external inputs
- (iii) have lasting effects
- (iv) have low visibility
- (v) involve institutions in the sense of (a) management procedures in government or parastatals, and/or (b) formal or informal local-level organisations and groups.

Such changes already take place. But quite often, latent energy and creativity require for their release an external ally, catalyst, or resources which may be provided either directly or indirectly by an aid agency.

If this is where much of the need and opportunity lies, much of the competition between donors is still for the more obvious and visible projects and programmes. Given this competition, the net contribution of UK aid may be rather low if it concentrates on such projects, which can be funded anyway from other sources. The greatest net contribution of UK aid may be in sensitive support for more difficult, less visible, and less popular activities. Given the financial cuts in UK aid, this may also be where the UK has or should develop a comparative advantage, since these activities tend to be staff - rather than capital - intensive.

The five suggestions which follow seek variously to improve perception and understanding, to explore and develop new approaches, and to augment and focus local capabilities. The first three are likely to involve technical assistance and more practical implications for the management and orientation of technical assistance which are not taken up in this note.

1. Sponsor and support experimental and pilot programmes and projects

ODM should encourage, sponsor and support experimental approaches for helping the rural poor. By their nature, experiments are risky and a high failure rate is probable. Failure can, however, in a sense be successes if care is taken to learn the lessons which they teach.

Where possible such initiative should:

- a) operate through the normal government or parastatal local-level bureaucracy rather than through a special organisation
- b) involve procedures and approaches which are widely replicable if they prove good
- c) be carefully evaluated
- d) be followed through with wide dissemination of the experience and conclusions, both nationally and internationally
- e) be widely replicated if they are successful

Some fields in which experimental approaches may be particularly desirable are:

- the formation of groups of poor people
- land reform and reorganisation
- reorienting agricultural extension to smaller, poorer farmers
- the provision of services to remote and/or nomadic or transhumant people
- the management of irrigation bureaucracies
- the management of pastoralism
- collaboration and mutual learning between research (eg agricultural research) staff and farmers

2. Promote and support rural planning and R and D which is environment-specific, multi-disciplinary, and future-oriented

Current rural R and D is often mono-disciplinary, limited to one crop or other narrow focus, and based on thinking which starts in the present. To complement and correct these approaches, some planning and R and D should work backwards from future factor endowments to specify what should be done now, and in particular, the characteristics of technologies which should be developed now. This need is particularly vital where there is environmental degradation, acute rural poverty, and population pressing severely on resources. Such work should identify much more clearly what has to be done now to generate adequate livelihoods and an acceptable level of living for poor rural people in foreseeable futures. There will be implications for rich country as well as poor country R and D.

In practical terms, this means that Governments should be invited to specify problem environments in which they would welcome such planning and R and D. The approach may best be carried out through three-way collaboration between local inhabitants, national personnel and technical assistance personnel. In some cases, present initiatives might be built on. In others, it will be necessary to create a new, though perhaps temporary, institution in the form of a research and planning team.

3. Link aid with improved management and distribution

Aid projects may quite often provide an opportunity for a lasting contribution to the rural poor through devising and introducing new procedures. Such management procedures should not be an incidental by-product but a central focus. A neglect of such procedures and of the realities of rural administration is liable, whatever the intentions, to mean that a disproportionate share of benefits go to those who are already better off. Conversely, close attention to these aspects might quite often lead to lasting improvements in relative benefits to poor rural people.

In practical terms, this means careful examination and negotiation of rural aid proposals to open up the opportunity to assist such reforms. A current opportunity may be the management of irrigation bureaucracy in Sri Lanka to promote and assist in reform of water distribution (to the benefit of the poorer and those who get less water and get it less regularly). Such reforms, if successful, replicable and replicated, may have a vast potential for more equitable distribution of resources and incomes in rural areas.

4. Provide funds to enhance the discretion and capability of local-level staff

Block grants to local-level (district or below) staff can be used to break bottlenecks, encourage local initiative, and improve the effectiveness and morale of staff. The provision of such funds may quite often be resisted in Ministries of Finance which distrust local-level staff. However the non-quantifiable benefits of such programmes may be high and they may provide the basis for more substantial and effective devolution to the local level. The specification of purposes for which such funds can be used also provides an opportunity for directing the attention of local-level staff towards the rural poor.

In practical terms this means that the UK should make it known governments where appropriate that it is in principle willing to provide funds for block grants to the local level with the proviso that they shall be used to benefit the poorer people.

5. Support programmes which involve national university students in research or work in rural areas

Today's university students are tomorrow's political leaders, administrators and technicians. It is difficult to overstate how important it is that their university experience should include research or work in rural areas. Experiences with third year dissertations for students at the University of Dar es Salaam, and with practical rural work with university students in Bangladesh, suggest that a great deal can be achieved in terms of understanding and local-level benefits through well-

organised rural work in long vacations. This may be a key way in which future urban bias in staff preferences and commitment can be at least partially counteracted.

In practical terms this means that the UK should be alert for opportunities to encourage and support rural poverty-oriented vacation work by University students.

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