

Simple is sophisticated

by Robert Chambers

Robert Chambers argues that to achieve rural development in the Third World, the time is overdue for a reversal of professional values; that ideas of sophistication should be stood on their head; and that true professional sophistication is often to be found in simplicity.

In common usage today "sophisticated" means refined, cultivated, advanced and complex, the opposites of crude, boorish, primitive and elementary. Almost everywhere, professionals, including engineers, economists, doctors, architects and agronomists, prefer procedures and techniques which are described as sophisticated and which are variously complex, exact and costly. Professionals believe that it is by using such procedures and techniques that they can best prove their ability and competence. For them, "sophisticated" technology is more prestigious than intermediate

or appropriate technology; "sophisticated" methods of project appraisal more rewarding than less elaborate methods; "sophisticated" surgery more challenging and satisfying than simple surgical operations.

But most of these procedures, techniques and values have been conceived and evolved in and for the rich, privileged and industrialised North, not the poor, underprivileged and predominantly rural South. The flow from North to South of textbooks, training, and professional recognition and rewards brainwashes and socialises Third World professionals into accepting these value systems which, as Carol J. Pierce Colfer has argued in a recent *Development Forum*, draw them away from the poorer rural people. Prestige and recognition go to those who use complicated and costly tools and whose papers are published in hard international journals. Professionals who seek a national or an international reputation all too often sense that this can best be achieved by excelling according to the values of the professional establishments of the North.

Much that passes for professional sophistication is inappropriate in the North itself; but it is doubly so in the South. The cult of these forms of sophistication reinforces dependence and impedes development in the South. Elaborate procedures and complex techniques, when transferred from North to South, have high costs. They generate an appetite for expensive equipment, for foreign experts, for counterparts, for training in the North, for data collection and for the processing and analysis of data. Resources to meet these demands are diverted from alternative uses. Urban

bias is accentuated, dependence sustained or deepened, and national professionals in the countries of the South gain skills, experience and contacts which encourage them to migrate to the North and to international agencies. The rural areas, where most of the poorer people live, remain peripheral within peripheral countries, a mine from which data, skills and funds are extracted.

Reaching the poor

But if development means ending poverty and deprivation, and if most of the poor and deprived people live in the rural areas of the South, then true sophistication will be found in those procedures and techniques which most effectively reach and help them. Methods tailored to the needs and situation of people who are poor and scattered in rural agricultural communities where skills are scarce and are likely to be radically different from those evolved for people who are relatively rich and concentrated in urban industrial centres in countries where skills are plentiful. What appears professionally sophisticated for the one will often be professionally crass for the other.

Some examples can illustrate the point. One can ask—which is more sophisticated:

—a soils map made over a long period by a highly trained scientist or a similar map made in a much shorter period in collaboration with local farmers?

—a fishing survey by an international expert, taking months, costing thousands of dollars, and culminating in proposals for expensive equipment to be used on a remote lake in an area with poor maintenance facilities; or a two-week survey by a local university student leading to immediately feasible proposals for upgrading and expanding existing fishing methods?

—the introduction of modern rice mills with a potential for destroying the livelihoods of hundreds of poor women; or the improvement of traditional rice hullers which would maintain their employment?

—a computer-based system requiring experts, counterparts and massive field data collection to monitor rural projects; or a weight-for-age chart to enable illiterate mothers to moni-

tor the growth of their babies?

—the work of a doctor who performs open-heart surgery for a few of the privileged; or that of a doctor who trains health workers from villages to provide services for many of the deprived?

In each case, there is room for argument on the basis of detail. But the general point stands out clearly. The second, simpler procedure or technique, closer to the rural people and involving them more, is more cost-effective. The lesson is the paradox: that in attacking rural poverty, it is sophisticated to be simple.

This principle, that simple is sophisticated, applies to much of rural development. It applies, first, in the design of rural development projects. Approaches which can be managed by rural people themselves are usually more successful than those which cannot. Approaches which enable them through their own efforts to improve their levels of living are usually more successful than those which require major inputs from outside. Housing, tools, machinery, cropping systems and services which they can maintain, operate and manage are likely to be more cost-effective than those which they cannot. Moreover, in rural development, simple is replicable.

Simple is sophisticated applies also to rural project appraisals. Manuals of social cost benefit analysis grow fast even if the economies in which they are applied do not. As economists struggle to make the procedures more comprehensive, they conflate more and more criteria into the one measure. As the procedures become more elaborate, they demand more manpower, more training and more experts, and generate more dependence and delay. They may make decision-making not better but worse as the decision-makers cannot see how the final figures have been arrived at. For large and expensive projects, simple decision matrices with columns for criteria would be clearer than much current practice; and for smaller projects, simple appraisals should suffice.

Field staff woes

Simple is sophisticated, too, with government procedures. Bureaucrats load procedures onto procedures, add reports to reports, modify regulations with further regulations, and pursue one circular with another. Procedures become ever more complicated and demanding in staff time. Moreover, field programmes are added to field programmes, often without considering the demands on the time of field staff who become hopelessly overloaded, and who are tied to their office and forced to invent data to fill up their reports. It may take five minutes for a central official to draft a circular requesting information, it may take field staff thousands of hours to provide it. It is also easier to introduce a new proce-

duce, report or regulation than to abolish an old one. In most bureaucracies, a pruning and simplifying of reports and procedures would release time and energy for more productive work, especially among field staff.

That simple is sophisticated is more and more widely recognised in technology. Each situation is special, but complexity, high cost and capital-intensity often go together. Such techniques are more accessible to those who are already better off and more powerful in rural areas and who are often enabled to use them to appropriate communal resources, to displace labour, and to reinforce their dominance as local elites. But it is not sophisticated to deprive poor people of resources or to put them out of work. Truly sophisticated techniques will be those usually simpler ones the net effect of which is to generate, not destroy, livelihoods.

Simple is sophisticated applies to choices made in research and development. Too often research and development decisions lead to innovations which are unnecessarily large-scale, costly, difficult to maintain, and dependent on spare parts or inputs which have to come from outside the rural environment. If the innovation is profitable, all of these factors tend to benefit those rural people who are already better off, rather than the poorer marginal farmers and landless labourers. In contrast, innovations which are small-scale, cheap, easy to maintain and use locally available and renewable materials and inputs, are more likely to benefit the poor. Too often research and development has been pointed in the wrong directions and has missed opportunities. Why otherwise was the bamboo tube-well invented not by an engineer but by a farmer? What were the engineers doing all those years? Why also was it that so much rice-breeding for so long concentrated so heavily on responses to chemical nitrogen which is often cornered by the larger farmers, to the neglect of improving nitrogen-fixation in the root zone of the rice plant, a biological technology which may be scale-neutral, cheap, renewable and more readily available to many more of the smaller farmers? Research and development should be directed towards those simple outcomes to which the poorer rural users will have better access.

Simple is sophisticated also applies to the choice of site for the conduct of research and development. Agricultural research carried out in controlled conditions behind the fences of a research station may enable the researcher to publish a tidy journal article. What matters, though, is whether the outcome fits conditions on farmers' fields. Mechanical research may most conveniently (and congenially for the researchers) be carried out in urban institutes of technology. What matters, though, is whether the techniques developed fit the needs, resources and skills of potential rural

users. In practice, much agricultural research leads to advice which is against farmers' interests; and much mechanical research leads to innovations which make no sense to rural people. Part of the solution is to move research off the research station, out of the urban institute, and into the rural environment. Conducting agricultural research trials on farmers' fields and with farmers and developing mechanical technologies in villages and with rural people may involve losses of precision and of professional respectability; but these will usually be outweighed by large gains in applicability, benefiting both from exposure to field conditions and from the detailed knowledge which rural people have of their needs and of their environment.

We have here a further paradox. Rural people are stereotyped as simple and ignorant, but they usually know much more about their environment than do highly trained and travelled outsiders such as government officials, staff of voluntary agencies, and researchers. Farmers know the soils, the plants, the pests, the seasons, the problems and the risks. Farmers on their fields experience the sequence and conditions of their cultivation as a whole and have an insight not constrained by disciplinary blinkers. Their adaptations are often skillful, sensitive and subtle—in short, sophisticated—and may involve many activities, many crops, many linkages not obvious to outside observers, and many complex choices. It is only when the approaches made by outsiders are themselves simple and adaptable that the knowledge and skills of rural people can be called into play, enabling their sophistication to make its full and fruitful contribution.

Who's sophisticated?

If all this is so, who then are the sophisticated professionals? They are, I suggest, those who see the challenge of simplicity—that it is personally and intellectually demanding, and often more difficult than conventional complexity. They are those whose values and practices are related to the needs and knowledge of rural people and who use their professional training as a means to serve them and not as an end in itself. They are those for whom the primary complexity is that of the rural environment and of human adaptations to it, and not that of the methods developed in and for the rich, urban and industrialised North. They are those who are willing to learn from and work with rural people, gaining insight, relevance and priorities from their knowledge and the needs they express. They are those whose simple life styles keep them close to rural people.

Such true professionals are already at work. They are those economists and planners who rebuff the interests which try to foist on their countries

complex technologies which will destroy the livelihood of poor people. They are those officials who abstain from flooding field staff with demands for excessive data and for the instant implementation of impossible programmes. They are those in voluntary agencies and governments who repeatedly expose themselves to rural realities and whose work is sensitively tuned to the needs of the poorest people.

They are engineers who give up conventional careers in order to work with rural people in developing appropriate technologies; doctors who train paramedical staff to do what doctors did before; agricultural scientists who work on farmers' fields in order to make their research more relevant. They are in each case people who have the vision and courage to question their professional indoctrination, to risk their careers, to abandon the interests of their class, and to tailor and trim their work to fit the needs of those who are deprived. They are the true professionals. And it is their work that is truly sophisticated.

They are as yet a minority, often discriminated against in promotion, denied opportunities to publish, and still regarded by many in the professional establishments as a lunatic fringe. They have the satisfaction, though, of knowing that their work matters, not only for what it achieves now but also for the example it sets. For they are not a lunatic fringe but a vanguard, presenting a foretaste of a possible future when professional values will have been reversed and when the nature of true sophistication in trying to eliminate rural poverty will have been better and much more widely understood.

But these changes are kicking against the pricks. A massive conservative inertia in professional and university establishments in both North and South weighs against this reversal of values. Much of the critical reappraisal has to occur in the institutions which are dominant—the international organisations, and organisations in the North—professional associations, universities, training institutes and donor agencies. Awkward and painful questions have to be asked, and answered, about university curricula, about professional recognition, about the criteria adopted by the editorial boards of professional journals, about the content of textbooks, about exchanges of professionals between countries, and about life-styles. Only in this way, and through an exercise of imagination and will, does it seem possible that we can slough off the archaic and primitive ideas of sophistication which pervert so much professional activity. ■