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## COGNITIVE PROBLEMS OF EXPERTS IN RURAL AFRICA

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### *Cores, Peripheries and Biases of Knowledge*

In this talk I shall examine some cognitive problems of 'experts' from outside Africa, especially as these concern rural Africa and the poorer rural people. The discussion can be set in a context of cores and peripheries of knowledge. The cores are based in the universities and research institutes of rich countries which have abundant resources to generate knowledge and to communicate it world-wide. From these cores, gradients of diminishing resources and power to communicate can be traced all the way out to the poor, rural peripheries. Rural people have their own knowledge with its own validity, but they are isolated and have little power to communicate it. The dominant flow is from the centre outwards, from the rich, urban, industrialised, high status and powerful cores to the poor, rural, agricultural, low status and weak peripheries. There is very unequal leverage between the bearers of, respectively, centralised modern knowledge and localised traditional knowledge; and this is reflected, as comes out so clearly and eloquently in Adrian Adams'<sup>1</sup> paper, in very unequal and often mystifying face-to-face interactions between outside experts and rural people. The 'knowledge' in the dominant flow may be inappropriate but those who carry it to the peripheries are often not inclined or able to understand this.

I can draw out some of what I want to say from a story against myself. When I was working for the High Commissioner for Refugees based in Geneva, there were some 2 million refugees in Africa, the vast majority of them rural. The people who had been recruited to work on refugee problems were many of them, in our senses, experts, having professional training and coming from Europe and North America. But their professional training was inappropriate, since many were lawyers or social workers unfamiliar with the situation they were dealing with, often involving large numbers of remote, very poor people in rural Africa. I thought it would be sensible to hold a seminar for UNHCR staff and to expose them to the insights of social scientists who had worked on problems of agricultural settlement and rural development in Africa. This, I thought, would serve to correct some of their professional biases and misconceptions. So we held a meeting with a number of social scientists in Arusha. But in the event, this served to replace one set of biases with another and I had to spend the next six months correcting misconceptions which came out of the meeting.

The most serious misconception was a negative view of organised agricultural settlement for refugees. This negative view had two sources. In the first place, the social scientists were highly trained in criticism. It is no coincidence that so much of the writing about government initiatives in rural development is negative. Many of the books written about agricultural projects in Africa are disaster stories, an early example being K.D.S. Baldwin's book on The Niger Agricultural Project,<sup>2</sup> and perhaps the best known, René Dumont's False Start in Africa.<sup>3</sup> In part, this negative tendency reflects the reward system in the social sciences. We are trained to be critical and to find things going wrong, and we are then praised by our peers for our perceptiveness in seeing through official myth to the less favourable reality underneath. We earn more points professionally by writing about failure than about success.

Second, there was a time lag in the understanding of the social scientists of what was going on in rural Africa. They were about 10 years out of date. Their observations were based on what had been studied and written about in the 1960s when there were many errors with agricultural settlement in East Africa. They did not know that most of these errors had been corrected already by the people in the organisation to which they were talking. UNHCR had some highly successful agricultural settlements which had benefited indirectly from the findings of earlier research. Perhaps this time lag is a universal problem. It is compounded by the Ph.D. system in which the gap between field research and

publication of a thesis may be a decade, as in the case of Conrad Reining's book The Zande Scheme.<sup>4</sup> (a major contribution to understanding agricultural settlement but long delayed in its publication). There is very, very rapid change in rural Africa, but the high status, university-generated system of knowledge on which we rely is permanently out-of-date, in contrast with the continuously updated knowledge of rural people themselves.

One can go further, and note that there is an unfortunate connection between negative social science and the time lag. Social scientists are attracted to study new initiatives. It is precisely when new approaches are being tried out that most goes wrong. This is when information is gathered and written up. Again and again, as with agricultural settlement schemes, the effect can be a negative myth propagated and believed by precisely those who are supposed to be the bearers of truth.

Another set of problems concerns professionalism. Professional values, norms, concerns, and cognitive structures are predominantly formed and set in the university systems of the rich world. When transferred to rural African environments they are often inappropriate. With UNHCR, this was an acute problem because those recruited had been lawyers and social workers trained for and able to work with situations in Europe for which legal protection and individual counselling were required. The problems in Africa were different, with widely dispersed large populations of very poor people. More generally, even when the expert for the task comes from the appropriate professional background, there are still underrecognised problems. For instance, the way in which Ministries have been created in Africa has derived from the disciplines which African countries had thrust upon them or which they imported from outside. Ministries of Animal Health have been generated by the concerns of vets and have been dominated by vets. Ministries of Agriculture have similarly been generated and dominated by agriculturalists. At first sight this may seem natural, normal and sensible, but a close look at farming systems often shows an integration of livestock and crop husbandry which is neither reflected in the division of the Ministries nor indeed catered for by them. In consequence of the disciplinary organisation of Ministries, this important aspect of small farming has been systematically neglected in African countries.

The import into Africa of expertise developed for other needs in other countries has also concentrated attention and prestige on some activities to the neglect of others. The emphasis on export crops as against food crops is well known. Further, the food crops and livestock of poor people have been neglected as being low status and outside the range of concerns of outside experts. Much was once written about the cattle complex of East African pastoralists, but the strongest cattle complex may have been that of expatriate veterinary and animal husbandry experts. A great deal of attention has been paid to exotic cattle and almost none to goats. Even in a country such as Botswana where goats are a significant part of the economy for many poor people, very little attention has been paid to them until recently. A few years ago there was only one professional in the whole Ministry of Agriculture who was concerned with smallstock, although many were concerned with the larger, more prestigious and more familiar cattle. Again, medical emphases can be questioned, and in particular the relative prominence given to vector-borne diseases, which may be in some sense attractive to work with, to the considerable neglect of the main killers in many areas which are the diarrhoeas. Several biases may influence the choices and concerns of professionals - towards what is large rather than small, temperate rather than tropical, modern rather than traditional, marketed rather than subsistence, clean rather than dirty, and linked to international and rich country prestige systems rather than to the needs and lives of poorer rural people.

#### *Rural Development Tourism*

Much of what experts learn about rural areas is, thus, influenced by their own cognitive biases. It is also very often mediated by 'rural development tourism' -

the brief rural visit by an outside professional who sets out from an urban centre. Little has been written about rural development tourism, a phenomenon which is extremely widespread and which affects the perceptions of tens or hundreds of thousands of officials as well as of the much smaller number of outside experts. It applies also to researchers on rural visits, though social anthropologists quite often deliberately offset the biases which follow.

With a visiting expert three characteristics are almost universal. The expert starts from an urban centre; is in a hurry; and is trying to find out something. These characteristics reinforce biases which prevent exposure to and learning about rural poverty, and particularly the poorer rural people. Four biases are particularly significant.

(i) *spatial*

Tarmac and roadside biases are marked. There is a tendency not to visit the more remote areas. The very fact that the word 'remote' is automatically taken to mean remote from an urban centre itself indicates how deeply imbedded in ourselves is the core-periphery way of thinking. The centre is so obviously urban. At the same time what seems to be happening in many parts of Africa is that the poorer people are being extruded from areas of higher potential into areas of lower potential which are less well served by communications and less likely to be visited and seen. Population movements in Ukambani in Kenya are an example of this process which can also be found in other parts of East Africa and in West Africa. Other poor people move up into similarly inaccessible forest areas. As for the more accessible roadsides, Joseph Ssenyonga, who worked as a social anthropologist in Western Kenya, coined the term 'elite roadside ecology',<sup>5</sup> thinking particularly of the road from Kisumu to Kakamega. This road was tarred and provided with services such as water, electricity, and telephone, besides buses and small markets. Those people who were better off bought up the roadside plots and built on them. The poorer people moved away out of sight. Driving along that road now the visitor sees the houses of those who are better off, but not the poorer people who have moved back from the road and out of sight. As a result, the visiting expert, or indeed civil servant, gains a very slanted visual impression of the area. The same may apply in many other parts of Africa with ribbon development along roadsides. And these spatial biases - tarmac, roadside, accessibility - are accentuated by shortages of funds and fuel for travelling. Rising oil prices, shortages of foreign exchange, cuts in recurrent budgets, and the tendency for cuts to fall on the travel and transport vote, combine to keep rural development tourists even more on main roads and near urban centres.

(ii) *project*

Visits tend to be to projects, especially the pet project close to the capital city and convenient for visitors. Such projects solve the problem of what to do with VIPs whose programmes have a day to be filled in. They also attract innumerable short-term visitors of the international jet set. It would be an intriguing exercise to go round the capitals of Africa and identify these projects. One such is the Mwea Irrigation Settlement in Kenya, a convenient 65 miles from Nairobi on a tarred road. The manager once told me that he spent 45 per cent of his time showing round visitors. To each individual or group he repeated the same statement. As Jon Morris has argued, there were a number of over-favourable myths about this project.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to avoid concluding that the continuous repetition of a speech to outsiders helped develop and reinforce these myths. The project was, indeed, successful in many ways, but less successful than believed. I have been to international conferences at which people have stood up and talked about an irrigation project that they visited in Africa (and easily identifiable as Mwea) and repeated to one another these myths, reinforcing what I believe to have been misperceptions about that particular project. Another example was the belief that with Ujamaa Vijijini in Tanzania in the 1960s there was substantial and widespread communal production at the village level. This myth was partly generated by social



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Then students seeking Ph.Ds  
believe that everyone agrees  
that rains don't do for rural study  
suits get wet and shoes get muddy

And bureaucrats of urban type  
wait prudently till crops be ripe  
before they venture far afield  
to ask politely 'what's the yield?'

The international experts' flights  
have other seasons; winter nights  
in New York, Paris, Brussels, Rome  
are what drive them, in flocks, from home

And Northern academics too  
are seasonal in their global view;  
for they are seen in third world nations  
mainly during long vacations.

Long vacation bias may direct attention north of the equator to the worst time of the year, such as August in the Gambia or Sierra Leone. More generally, though, visits of experts who are fleeing the northern winter direct attention to the period after harvest when people's body weights are rising, when the most unhealthy time of year is past, and when celebrations and marriages are taking place.

Other biases interact with these. Politeness and protocol deter experts from trying to meet or find out about those people who are poorer or who are more deprived. There are biases of modernity - a tendency to look at the school, the tractor, the new road, rather than whatever is 'traditional'. The biases interlock so that certain places and certain people tend to be visited and learnt from rather than others. A progressive farmer beside a main road near a capital city may influence the perceptions of a whole series of visiting experts because he is the person they are taken to. In contrast, a poor widow in a remote area may not impinge on the consciousness of anyone within the official government system at all. As for the bias towards progressive farmers, one to whom I was once taken asked me to sign his visitor's book, inside which was a veritable 'Who's Who' of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Reflection on the core-periphery nature of knowledge, and on these biases in exposure to and learning about rural areas, suggests a case for introspection on the part of experts. One can ask who expatriate experts are and how they have been selected or self-selected from the population from which they come. One can ask about their psychological needs. The discussion earlier in this conference about drives to encourage the growing of cotton, and campaigns against soil erosion, was fascinating. There is a puzzle why campaigns which were so obviously unpopular, and which we now know to have been so often against the interests of African farmers, were pursued with such enthusiasm and even missionary zeal. Perhaps they answered some of the psychological needs of expatriate officers. Perhaps because both cotton growing and soil conservation required a high degree of supervision, discipline and control, they may have been attractive to expatriates as means of imposing order on what appeared a primitive, disorganised, and inefficient agricultural system - shifting cultivation and inter-cropping, now recognised as rational and able adaptations on the part of small farmers. Again, one can ask about the deeper meanings of straight lines and standardisation. The model village introduced into Sierra Leone, described yesterday, and the buildings which were all identical, may have had psychological importance for the expert who introduced them. A further example is Central Province in Kenya where in the early 1960s it was illegal to build a round hut. All new buildings had to be square. At one level, this can be explained in terms variously of cultural imperialism or hygiene. At another

level, perhaps it reflected need on the part of the administrators for precision and control. Nowadays, however, and despite what Adrian Adams says from her West African experience,<sup>10</sup> I have the impression that younger experts are much more sensitive to issues such as these.

To correct these biases is not easy but some possibilities can be noted. Professional values in the rich, powerful, core institutions can be challenged. In particular, the values of editors of international journals can be attacked and shifted away from some of the most marked anti-poverty biases. Concerning rural development tourism, tactics can be suggested, particularly taking more time and going further afield. There are also techniques for rapid rural appraisal which have been and can be developed as a technology for learning, lying intermediate between on the one hand rural development tourism and casual empiricism, and on the other very extensive surveys and in-depth social anthropology.<sup>11</sup> Again, a part of the in-service training of experts could be carrying out rural research with rural residents in countries in which they are to work. This would be designed as a learning process for them, with the rural people and the host government as the donors of the learning. Another possibility is using games and role-playing for gaining insights into what it is like to be the other person, in this case the poor rural person.

Running through these suggestions is a theme of reversals. The transfer of expertise is thought of much of the time as being in one direction only. It should, however, be very much a two-way traffic. But the inequality of power and status between experts and poor rural people means that a conscious and deliberate effort has to be made to achieve such reversals. One of the most effective ways of learning from rural people is by working with them, as David Gibbon at the Overseas Development Group, University of East Anglia and Paul Richards at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of London have both independently found. Working as labourers they have found that farmers will volunteer information which they as outsiders did not know how to ask and which the farmer did not know would be of interest.<sup>12</sup> Such insights can be significant for understanding farming systems and opportunities for its further development.

Ironically, some of the new knowledge easiest to add to the centralised modern network is the localised knowledge that rural people themselves have of their environments. Little more is needed than going, sitting down, asking, and listening; and then going on asking open-endedly and listening. Yet this is what the professional training of many of us disables us from doing by conditioning us to look down on indigenous technical knowledge, and to discount its validity and strength. There is potential here, particularly through linguistics and eliciting and understanding the categories and ways of thought of rural people, both for learning useful information from them, and for enabling them to control more of the development process. One contribution of attempts to learn from rural people will be respect for the richness and fine discrimination of their knowledge - of soils, animals, colours, micro-environments, and so on. The expert does not know what he can learn from rural people until he tries. The temptation, then, is not to allow time for trying. And yet the pay-off from reversals in learning can be very high indeed. If those who were responsible for planning the groundnut scheme had spent one afternoon in the area which they proposed to cultivate with local farmers, asking them about the soil and rainfall, they would have learnt that they were heading for disaster. As it was, the experts flew over in an aeroplane, saw a vast area of uncultivated bush, and assumed that it was fertile. Perhaps the best experts are those who recognise the many ways in which rural people themselves are the best experts.



# Footnotes

1. Adrian Adams, 'Open Letter to a Young Researcher', mimeo, paper presented at the Annual Conference of the African Studies Association of the UK, 1978.
2. K.D.S. Baldwin, *The Niger Agricultural Project, an Experiment in African Development*, Blackwell, 1957.
3. René Dumont, *False Start in Africa* Andre Deutsch, 1966 (first published as *L'Afrique Noire est Mal Partie*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1962)
4. Conrad C. Reining, *The Zande Scheme, an Anthropological Case Study of Economic Development in Africa*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston.
5. Joseph Ssenyonga, 'The Cultural Dimensions of Demographic Trends', *Populi*, 1976, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 2-11.
6. J.R. Moris, 'Tenant Life on Mwea, an Overview', in Robert Chambers and Jon Moris, eds., *Mwea: an Irrigated Rice Settlement in Kenya*, Afrika-Studien Nr. 83, Weltforum Verlag, Munich, 1973, esp. pp.298-312.
7. See especially *Mbioni*, the journal of Kivukoni College, Dar-es-Salaam.
8. For a review of the conference, see Robert Chambers. Richard Longhurst, David Bradley and Richard Feachem, 'Seasonal Dimensions to Rural Poverty: Analysis and Practical Implications', *IDS Discussion Paper No. 142*, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, February 1979. See also Richard Longhurst and Philip Payne, 'Seasonal Aspects of Nutrition: Review of Evidence and Policy Implications', *IDS Discussion Paper No. 145*, November 1979, and Robert Chambers, 'Health, Agriculture and Rural Poverty: Why Seasons Matter', *IDS Discussion Paper No. 148*, December 1979.
9. C. Fyfe, *Agricultural Dreams in Nineteenth Century West Africa*, 1980. Paper given at Aberdeen University African Studies Group Colloquium, March 1980. See pp.
10. Adams, *op. cit.*
11. See the papers of the Workshop (26-27 October 1978) and Conference (4-7 December 1979) on Rapid Rural Appraisal held at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9RE.
12. See for example Paul Richards, 'Community Environmental Knowledge in African Rural Development', *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 10, No.2, January 1979, pp.28-36. For a non-African example, see John K. Hatch, *The Corn Farmers of Motupe: a Study of Traditional Farming Practices in Northern Coastal Peru*, Land Tenure Center, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1976.