

Issues in agricultural rehabilitation —one

These observations and questions arise from famine disasters, but most of them also apply to most other types of disaster affecting agricultural populations.

The overarching issue in rehabilitation is how to enable households to gain or regain sustainable and secure livelihoods. A recent report (WCED, 1986, p. 3) makes sustainable livelihood security a central concept with these meanings:

Livelihood is defined as adequate stocks and flows of food and cash to meet basic needs. Security refers to secure ownership of, or access to, resources and income earning activities, including reserves and assets to offset risk, ease shocks and meet contingencies. Sustainable refers to the maintenance or enhancement of resource productivity on a long-term basis.

Taking sustainable and secure livelihoods as the main physical objective of agricultural rehabilitation, many issues are raised, especially regarding those who are weakest, most vulnerable and least able to help themselves. However three more general issues stand out.

1. Re-establishment or resettlement?

The question whether to enable people to re-establish themselves in their familiar environment, or whether to encourage and support their resettlement elsewhere poses ethical and practical dilemmas. How can good judgements be made as to whether Wollo, or the fringes of marginal cultivated areas in Sudan or in the Sahel, can provide secure, sustainable livelihoods to support their present populations? Will new farming systems with new crop, tree and animal combinations or new varieties, make more intensive and less risky exploitation possible in the future? If people should be encouraged to move, how should that encouragement be undertaken?

2. Disaster-proofing; sustainable self-reliance

The question here is how people who have been impoverished by disaster can be enabled to become less vulnerable to future disasters in a self-reliant manner. Disaster-proofing entails reducing risks of agricultural failure in bad years, and building up reserves and assets as buffers. Normal thinking about rehabilitation attempts to restore people to a previous condition, and this has advantages of familiarity for them, and relatively low inputs for programmes. Community-level disaster-proofing, through local committees and food and seed stocks, is also a sensible precaution where feasible. However in addition, and often much more important, is the search for new more stable and productive farming systems. Sometimes this requires radical action, like the successful exclusion of livestock from the eroded Kondoa area in central Tanzania (Ostberg, 1986). More often it requires combinations of land shaping, micro-catchments, water harvesting, and tree-ground crop-animal combinations. Trees can play a special part in this, not least as savings which can be cashed in periods of stress (Chambers and Leach, 1987). How can such new combinations, and such new farming systems be developed, and how can resource-poor farmers plant and protect trees, and wait for them to grow? To evolve more sustainable and productive farming systems with resource poor farmers, are new methods needed for agricultural research and new programmes to support farmers' own experiments and innovations?

3. Safety nets

The question here is how governments and NGOs can provide very early support to prevent impoverishment. By the time most early warning systems are giving warnings, and even more by the time action is taken on those warnings, it is too late to prevent impoverishment. Safety nets are required which people can use when they feel they need them, rather than when someone else decides they can have them. The Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra in India is an example, where groups of people

can demand work at the minimum wage as a right, and has lessons for Sub-Saharan Africa (McAlpin, 1987). Food for work programmes on demand could be a variant. Other measures could include floor prices and guaranteed purchase of wood, charcoal, livestock, jewellery or whatever else people sell or mortgage as part of their strategies for coping. Are such interventions feasible for governments in states which are heavily in debt, have weak administrations, and have government recurrent expenditure cut back by IMF conditionally? If not, what part can and should NGOs Play?

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