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**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

Integrated Rural Development: The Ethiopian Experience and the Debate by John M. Cohen

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1n49765j>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 17(2)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

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**Publication Date**

1989

**DOI**

10.5070/F7172016889

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Peer reviewed

John M. Cohen, *Integrated Rural Development: The Ethiopian Experience and the Debate*, Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1987.

The recent emphasis on structural adjustment policies and the debate over the role of African states in development have somewhat obscured earlier development questions. One major area of debate that focused on the role and impact of integrated rural development projects has been ably carried forward in a recent book by John Cohen. This book presents an overview of the key criticisms of integrated rural development projects, describes the history and impact of the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU) in Ethiopia, and then offers a defense of the potential contribution from integrated rural development projects.

Integrated rural development projects were initially designed as instruments for bringing together a wide number of goals into a single administrative project entity. These projects were not limited to pursuing singular goals such as providing inputs to farmers, introducing new seed types or improving livestock breeds. IRDPs incorporated diverse ventures such as irrigation schemes, road building, credit facilities and health care. In most cases, the operation of these projects was separate from government ministries, although many projects had the intention of eventually turning over different functions to these ministries at some point near the end of the project's life. The project ideal was that the IRDP provided donors and host governments as mechanism for addressing a number of problems in rural areas through a coordinated effort.

The first optimism over the potential role of IRDPs was tempered along with a general disappointment in development projects by the mid-1970s. As international agencies such as the World Bank and USAID came under increasing scrutiny, their projects were also undergoing tough analysis. In the case of specific project operations, critics of IRDPs argued that they were not efficient enterprises of the planning documents. They said that reviews of project reports showed that these large entities were often unable to reach small farmers in an effective way, that they were hampered by bureaucratic sloth and conflict between agencies, and that the ideal of bringing together a number of goals into one project was far more difficult in practice than in theory. As the 1970s continued, it was apparent that large IRDPs were beginning to fall in disfavor to some extent, through efforts at creating participatory mechanisms or more flexible project plans kept this mode of development alive through the developing world.

Cohen wants to rebut some of the most significant criticisms and the leading critics by focusing on CADU as one of the longest lasting IRDPs in existence. CADU has been identified as an important project

for the past two decades. It has managed to survive the overthrow of the Haile Selassie regime and to continue in restructured form under Mengistu's government. This by itself makes it interesting, as well as its long life, which is quite different from the usual five to seven year period of most projects. Cohen has been involved with CADU for nearly two decades, and this gives him a richer insight into this project than is usual for evaluators. Thus, while one might disagree with some of his conclusions, the depth of his knowledge about this particular project, and his ability to cut through the debate over IRDPs, sets this book apart from the usual single project study or overview on rural development.

From his work with CADU and his review of the literature on IRDPs, Cohen argues: "A close review of the most widely cited critiques of RDP demonstrates that the authors analyzing the intervention rely on secondary studies consolidating project evaluation reports." (228)

The great value of this book is that it accomplishes the author's major goals. It presents a well documented and coherent history of a large, complex and diverse project. The study offers an opportunity, somewhat unique, to look at how a large IRDP functioned in two radically different political regimes. Through presenting a comparative study and by challenging the critics of IRDPs, Cohen has produced a thorough and useful argument.

What remains unanswered, and which still needs further consideration, is what might be the future for IRDPs. The nature and structure of such operations still tends to preclude effective participation from low income groups. The resources channeled through large projects will inevitably be attractive to the "net" of individuals and organizations who hold considerable power and influence in any developing country. Given the impact of structural adjustment policies on reducing government bureaucracies, the role of non-governmental organizations needs serious consideration as perhaps providing alternative foundations for integrating development goals. Cohen's study offers helpful insights into the strengths and weaknesses of IRDPs, further work is now needed to see what aspects of large projects are feasible for more participatory and environmentally sustainable development. Whether such projects can be created in situations of inequity and contradictory institutional imperatives remains to be determined not only in research, but more importantly in practice.

Stephen Commins