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The Elusiveness of Rural Development Theory and Practice:

Domestic and Third World Perspectives Joined

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## Abstract

Rural development in both the Third World and the US suffers from many perceived failures and the lack of a theoretically rich conceptual framework by which effective rural development policies can be fashioned. Drawing upon Third World development literature, a perspective for domestic rural development is suggested. Development is defined by interdependence of increasingly specialized resources in production and the interdependence of relations among differentiated social groups including the rural disadvantaged. Effective programs must expand both resource utilization and restructure social relations that hinder development.

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Ted K. Bradshaw  
September 15, 1989

I. Perspectives on Development

The solution to rural underdevelopment remains elusive despite an abundance of efforts to help the poor, improve education and health, build housing, and create jobs. With due respect to the fact that development has been beneficial in many particular instances, an overall assessment must conclude that rural solutions in both the developed and underdeveloped world have failed to slow the descent of rural people into the grips of poverty, let alone reach the stated development goals of eliminating rural poverty or reducing rural inequality (see for example, Rondinelli and Ruddle, 1978; Seligson, 1984; Lewis, 1986). In some cases the rural poor have suffered from development efforts, and even worse, the same kinds of development failures recur in county after county, year after year (Johnston and Clark, 1982:9). Rural development has turned out to be more difficult than was expected or believed, a problem receiving attention in both domestic and Third World rural development literature.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a contrasting perspective, Lewis (1981) argues that development efforts are responsible for large GNP gains throughout the Third World and the potential of development efforts has scarcely been tapped. This may be true, but as Seligson concludes (1984, p. 402), "each passing day finds the world inhabited by a larger number of people who live in absolute poverty, even though the proportion of the world's population in absolute poverty may be declining."

developers have worked in isolation from each other. Perhaps by reason of training, by the peculiarities of work environment, by the specialization of channels of communication, or by the boundaries of professional association, people trying to solve the problems of underdevelopment in Appalachia (for example) rarely share their experiences with the people trying to solve the brutal and exposed problems of underdevelopment in India, Africa, Asia, or elsewhere. This essay is directed toward rural developers in advanced countries who could benefit from the conceptual and theoretical contributions of those working in the Third World.<sup>2</sup> This exercise is not intended as a full review of a very large literature but as a useful policy strategy: given the relatively easier task of domestic rural development, the lessons of the Third World can break the conceptual bottleneck rural development is in today.

### Two Third World Development Paradigms

The Third World rural development literature embraces a huge number of competing philosophies, ideologies, and strategies. In spite of a number of classification schemes, Third World development strategies are organized around two hotly debated paradigms (see for example, Wilber and Jameson, 1984; Evan and Stephens, 1988). The first is a classical economic model focusing on production and investment and the second is a conflict perspective focusing on restructuring patterns of dependence and control.

At the end of World War II the emphasis was on helping underdeveloped countries obtain enough economic and human resources to have self-sustaining

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<sup>2</sup>The utility of the insights from domestic rural development to the Third World is not developed here.

process of development, not economic growth. The key issue of who controls development becomes central.

The search for an appropriate Third World development model has not been won by either of the competing models. Most recently, the analytic effort has been to join the two traditions (See Higgott, 1983, Chap 4; Nafziger, 1979; Evans and Stephens, 1988) and to consider ways of achieving growth with local control. The contribution of the classical economics model is to draw our attention to the problems of resources and their effective utilization. The conflict perspective calls our attention to the problems of the structure of relations that hinder development. The reconciliation of the two involves the need to increase resource availability as a means to greater economic capacity and to expand networks of control so that social and economic exchanges are not based on dependency but on interdependence. Integrated development and the "growth with equity" programs have reflected this accommodation.

The problem of expanding the interdependence of rural economies and social groups is more visible in the Third World context than the domestic, yet it is an important lesson for rural development in the US. The popular domestic rural development industrial development strategy to encourage resource exploitation, economic growth, firm location, and job training for businesses is based on many of the same principles as the macroeconomic strategies used in the Third World. Likewise, domestic community development perspectives emphasize local organization and capacity as a vehicle for mobilizing resources. Community development strategies are in competition with economic models over deciding what is an effective use of resources and balancing the perceived interests of both development agencies and the



tradition has called attention to the fact that development is differentiation (eg, Smelser, 1959). As a society becomes more developed, its people are employed in more specialized roles, goods are more finely processed, and organizations are more functionally specific. With differentiation comes greater capacity and well being. As Landau (1972) points out, the concept of development "precisely means increased structural differentiation and functional specificity", which are the prerequisites for increased scale of performance. Development occurs when more highly differentiated resources and inputs are utilized by more differentiated organizations. While there are many variations on this theme, they are "minor or derivative" (Landau, 1972: 161).

Interdependence. The concept of differentiation is closely related to social interdependence, which is best defined as the complexity of relations among increasingly differentiated units. The breadth of Third World development experience points out that it is not enough to set about creating more differentiated resources, products, organizations, and control systems, but that the very structure of these relations becomes critical. Put another way, development is indicated by differentiation, but its smooth functioning is conditioned by patterns of interdependence. Interdependence is patterns of exchange--resources, legitimacy, sanctions, and payments. Interdependence increases as these exchanges become more complex in structure (from direct to sequential, to reciprocal and matrix), more controlling (from transfers to regulated exchanges, to conditional), more highly aggregated (from individual/individual exchanges to structured organizations) and with relationships that need to be sustained over long periods of time. Thus, a social system is more interdependent when more complex groups are interwoven

Secondly, in underdeveloped as well as developing countries, the urban advantage relative to the rural areas is so strong that it promotes urban economic concentration. The ability to organize, centralize, and control generally derives from urban areas. Rural people in most developing countries are more numerous, but they are also more dispersed, poor, inarticulate, and unorganized. Consequently, disparities between urban and rural living standards tend to diverge, driving rural depopulation (Lipton, 1982).

Interdependence patterns more easily operate where there is the greatest proximity and concentration of people and resources involved in various exchanges. The defining character of "rural" for policy purposes is low density population and small scale social organization, factors that mean economies of scale are not realized (Bradshaw and Blakely, 1987). Especially in underdeveloped areas where distance reducing technologies (transportation, telecommunications, etc) are inadequate, it is easy to see how development will concentrate in urban areas.

The third finding offers some hope: it is possible to overcome the bias of developed areas and invest money and time in rural development with positive and favorable results. It is not easy, but investments lead to pay offs. Although failure to reach ambitious goals is the norm, despair is not warranted. For example, investments paid off in the economic growth of Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and Hong Kong (see Gold, 1986; O'Hearn, 1989), much of the Third World has reached food self-sufficiency, and thousands of innovative community level projects in even the most depressed areas have relieved human misery (Korten, 1980). These examples prove that it is possible to assist development, and that doing something is usually

attention to cultural conditions is more than just a value appropriate to development, it is practical and efficient as well.

## II. Three Important Lessons from the Third World

The process and efforts of rural development in the Third World have many lessons for developers in rural backwaters of developed countries. Three of these lessons are selected for exploration here. First, the tension between the two traditions of Third World development, and their selected variables, leads to a categorization of development needs for different societies or communities. Second, the emphasis of one tradition of Third World rural development on dependency provides an important lesson for rural communities everywhere. Finally, Third World development provides a cautionary policy lesson: the development process is beset with uncertainty and a comprehensive solution is not viable.

### 1. Development Problems Distinguished.

The great variety of Third World situations and responses provides an extensive catalog of development problems. Building upon the two paradigms of development reviewed earlier, a typology of development strategies may be created. The problem faced by the classical economists is one of moving from limited resources and capacity to specialized resources and differentiated patterns of production. The problem faced by the focus on relations and control is one of moving from outside control or dependency to structures of exchange that include the majority of the poor population. At the risk of generalizing too broadly, one can argue that these two problems are universal in an interdependent world and that the problem of what is available for

Figure 1

Typology of development Problems

control within  
social structure

resource specialization

isolated, dependent

open  
interdependent

	constrained, limited	abundant, integrated
isolated, dependent	1 survival	2 exploited colonial
open interdependent	3 inefficient	4 self-sustaining

destroy local control and capacity.

Finally, in Cell 4 are found self sustaining societies that are neither trapped by limited resources nor dependency. They have created specialized resources, and invested in human as well as physical capital, within a functionally differentiated social organization that is diverse and interdependent. Development strategies in this context include what has been termed "integrated development," though effective programs include more than just a combination of resource and human skills--they also include major efforts to restructure social and cultural patterns for development. The development problem in these societies is often seen as entrepreneurial in that the major objective is innovation.

In many ways the goal of development is to move from cell 1 to cell 4 without getting trapped in either 2 or 3. Intervention policies need to help achieve this balance.

## 2. Development is the Reduction of Dependence.

Change resulting from interventions in organizations, firms, and communities is developmental only if its effect is improvement of individual well being, not some internal goal which is an end in itself. If the focus is on individual well being, then we can make the assumption that the objective of rural development policies should be to reduce dependence, by ensuring both independence and interdependence. Development is thus conceived as a theory of how to reduce dependency situations in which a person or group is at a disadvantage in relations with other persons or groups.

Third World dependency theory has gone a long way to explain how

political alternatives that hampers efforts to increase economic alternatives), or that some alternatives such as massive dams or farm tractors may not benefit the deprived people for whom they were intended.

3. Managing Uncertainty. A critical lesson to be learned from the literature on Third World development is that development strategies are more an art than a science and are best tailored to individual community and cultural situations. In contrast, comprehensive formulas fail in the face of specific problem solving. Korten (1980), drawing on extensive experience throughout the Third World, admonishes developers and development policy to learn from past efforts and to design programs that are part of a holistically perceived learning process as opposed to a bureaucratically mandated blueprint. In such a strategy, the people being assisted as well as the administrators are engaged in a collective learning experience based on extensive local control and participation. However, for Korten, as well as most other reviewers of the development process, it remains easier to evaluate why projects have succeeded than why they have failed, even though there is much more to learn from the study of the failings of projects (including those that are nominally successful).

Development does not fit the concept of a neatly bounded problem for which there is a definitive answer. Johnston and Clark are correct to point out that development is best conceived of as a "mess" following Ackoff's phrase (1974) because development involves:

a staggering variety of people and organizations, all pulling, pushing, and otherwise interacting with each other in pursuit of their various interests.... Turning messes into problems about which something constructive can be done is one way of viewing the central task of policy analysis (Johnston and Clark, 1982:11).

are also available which emphasize practical issues. In general these suggest that developers in the Third World have a greater awareness of the need to sustain their efforts for a long time, to seek incremental improvements for very complex issues, to integrate various types of solutions, and to build networks of poor people from the ground up. They sense the interdependence of development and people, as opposed to the tight rationality of specialized programs that they have to administer. Domestic programs violate many of these principles. They have short program cycles, seek simple single factor solutions (eg, rural banking reform), fail to coordinate development efforts (training, natural resource, infrastructure, and other programs that do not get packaged properly), and they have weak involvement of the people who are to be served.

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