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ITS TIME FOR THIRD WORLD GOVERNMENTS TO INCREASE
THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

by

Allen LeBaron

Paper presented to the session on International Agriculture and Agricultural Policy, Western Agricultural Economics Association meeting, Montana State University, Bozeman, July 23-25, 1978.

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It is possible to detect two intertwined arguments in the many complaints about lack of effectiveness or "failures" of technical assistance programs. The first is that the major U.S. donor, USAID, has a cumbersome structure that has evolved to serve only bureaucratic ends (3). The second is that we have not learned how to do the job (2). Of course donor agencies have their problems and I have recently helped to take a stab at delineating some of them (6). Also, it is always possible to learn and improve (even though it is my opinion that we already have quite a bit of adequate technical expertise to call on). A third argument, one that bears repeating ^{and} ~~and~~ a lot more emphasis, is the subject of my paper: the major reason for lack of technical assistance effectiveness is found in a complex of factors for which recipient nations must bear much of the responsibility.

These range from a shortage of human capital and a weak scientific base to an unwillingness to admit mistakes, from inadequate salary scales to hamstringing ideological biases. In case after case, T. A. programs of large size are forced to operate within existing host government public sector institutions which are notoriously inefficient and immature.

The situation is ^eacerbated by the quantity of development money, projects and programs being thrust onto 3rd world countries. This has reached the point where not just 10 or even 20, but as much as 30 agricultural missions are trying to operate in one country simultaneously! Given the weak administrative environments, the resultant stumbling around is virtually unmanageable. I don't seriously expect 3rd world governments to turn money down but it is interesting to not^e how efficient they are at keeping the loans and grants rolling in. Donors are being played against each other in order

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to maximize concessionary terms and arrangements. And once the contracts or agreements are assured, the object often is to neutralize the presence of any foreign technicians assigned to the programs. Unfortunately, this type of efficiency simply leads to an ever increasing appearance of great activity without commensurate measurable progress.

Meanwhile the 3rd world complains about everything from international trade patterns to cultural oppression. Some of this is legitimate, some of it is extreme. There seems to be a 3rd world sentiment, made very obvious by the recent food conferences, that the developed nations to a large degree should hold themselves responsible for the food and welfare of the underdeveloped. This sentiment has made enough of an impression that, in Canada for example, there has since been public debate over an agricultural policy involving a moral obligation to feed the world. And while the U.S. has not gone that far, the way we treat foreign aid recipients has many elements of some kind of giant affirmative action program. It seems we are willing to put up with an awful lot to minimize accusations of being unfriendly, unfair, unfeeling or cold hearted. Poor nations certainly have problems and it may be that our country can help alleviate them, but we are not helping them or ourselves by taking some of their lack of development arguments too seriously, as seems to be the case when we finance unsound and weak programs or even encourage host governments to invent new ones.

This cannot help but have negative impacts. In the first place, the amounts of just U.S money involved are so large in some cases that they must lead to charges of neo-colonialism and, what may be even worse, these countries are getting the impression that they can obtain development from the "outside." This simply is not possible--development cannot be pur-

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chased, even at someone else's expense. Measured purely in T. A. terms, the amount of time and energy that has already been spent in the last 25 years, with uneven effect, is evidence that they have shirked the task.

Now time is running out. At the very moment we are being warned about potential food shortages, Leontiff (only one example) has estimated a 25 year limit on continued global economic growth at present rates. This means that various 3rd world countries need to find out what their options really are and make as many adjustments as possible before they have even more constraints to deal with.

At a recent conference on managing rural development at McGill University, a young woman from Senegal told a panel of "experts" that foreign donors and technicians had an obligation to "understand" her people and their national aspirations. My answer to her was that, although sympathetic to her point of view, 25 years had passed since Point 4 began and I did not have the time. When she was ready to go to work we might get together, meanwhile I would go elsewhere. My response made things a little tense. Actually it should have been stronger: the greatest single contributor to the resources drain connected with a quarter century of T. A. effort is that developing countries have been allowed to waste the time and talent of technicians from many lands, not just the U.S.

Virtually every recipient nation has the resource base to greatly increase the effectiveness of its T. A. utilization. But this is being ignored and in extreme cases T. A. is simply treated as a free good.

This raises the question of the degree to which some countries are really committed to scientific endeavor, even though they appear to have a primitive faith that technology is going to solve their development problems.

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Do their leaders believe that they, themselves, will not have to master a basic minimum of production and control processes to guide their own futures?

How long can the common people live with the uncoordinated, unscientific, and vacillating programming that emanates from the middle and upper levels of their public sector officials? Unless this syndrome is broken by some combination of better trained, dedicated people, hewing to achievable goals, there is little hope of making progress before ecological or other limiting forces close off available options. Therefore if development progress is genuinely desired, failure to face up to administrative ^{reform} ~~before~~ requirements may be the single most important constraint to effective technical assistance.

Recognition of these interlocking pressures calls for replacing the U.S. "affirmative action" stance with a tougher approach in which T. A. pre-conditions are effectively imposed. The minimum conditions should be a demonstrated commitment to human capital development and public institution reform supported in some instances by population controls.*

Not everyone will like a tougher approach, and U.S. officials have told me on more than one occasion that "We can't impose our will on another country." This argument is hard to swallow. The State Department is not afraid to impose preconditions in other connections, for example in the Carter Administration's approach to human rights. At the opening of a two-day national foreign policy conference on human rights, Deputy Secretary of State, Mr. Warren Christopher, is reported as saying: "Both economic and military assistance are governed in part by human rights with more aid going to 'countries with a high regard

* There is a kind of half-way house which might be a substitute for pre-conditions in certain (research) programs or special situations. This is to vest in the foreign technicians virtual control over the program and the resources involved.

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for human rights.' Those with what he called a poor record have faced restrictions, deferred bilateral aid and U.S. opposition to loans from international agencies like the World Bank.'(4)

Where necessary, therefore, it seems to me that nations could be asked to adhere to certain preconditions in order to benefit from the cost, time and effort of persons and nations delivering technical assistance. Many other donor nations impose something similar to preconditions in that they are fairly careful about what they will or will not do in T. A. effort-- they specialize or pick politically neutral programs. Finally, I am not alone in suggesting pre-conditions. Dr. Paddock (and others) has recently urged dropping all forms of aid to countries without effective population controls (2).

Once pre-conditions are met, we do not want to be caught short by lacking a route to follow. Here is where as taxpayers and concerned citizens, it seems Congress and USAID need to hear some suggestions.

USAID and other DONOR countries and agencies should stop acting as if they are hungry for contracts or programs. In the case of USAID, project managers are so dedicated to emptying the pipeline that it is little wonder that recipient nations have a false impression of what will be achieved at low cost to themselves and possibly at little or no obligation. Some type of international clearing house for donors working in any given country ought to be set up outside the borders and beyond that reach of the host country Bureaucracy.

In other words all the donors must rethink what it is they are trying to do -- for example, are they pushing welfare, output or what? Is the spectre of a world food shortage real or not? Will the current emphasis on the poorest of the poor make nations self-sufficient or not? What is the best way to increase food output?

It seems to me that the poor of this world, now and for the future, cannot really expect to benefit from economic growth rates as high or higher than people now living have experienced.* This is because significant economic improvement would require an amount of global growth that is limited by the environment and possibly by society itself. Of all the potential "bads" that such limits will impose on underdeveloped areas, I will concentrate on food shortage.

As of this date USAID has a 25-year history in the T. A. game, but probably does not have the internal resources to take on anything that could be called a world food problem. Many of the original and most experienced staff have either retired or are about to. Less than 18% of the staff are classed as technicians and only 3% as agriculturalists (4). In addition, as far as increasing world food production is concerned, the "small farmer mandate" is a millstone.** The mandate might lead to programs that would improve the welfare of rural families to some degree, but marginal farmers could never be the backbone of production to feed lots of other people.***

* There is a possibility for a certain amount of re-shuffling-- some will do better than others--and for this reason as well as that absolute growth will not stop, better managerial ability and processes will still be needed (to ferret out and exploit various options).

** Of course there are other "millstones" from a U.S. Operating Mission point of view: Role of Women in Development, Concern for the Environment, etc.

*** The mandate is self-destructive in any case. If it is successful, especially in helping farmers increase output, unless the increase can be sold, prices will fall, and the least efficient (poorest of the poor) farmers will be destroyed.

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Therefore, if USAID chooses to gird up for what may be the important battle from the standpoint of the majority of the world's people, the Agency will have to create a whole new staff profile and a completely new and different way of selecting projects and countries in which to work (the best places to solve food shortages may not be in the poorest countries). Any success in a world food battle would require much more emphasis on heavily research oriented programs than USAID has liked to fund in the past. Unless the Agency could see a way out via support for the International Centers, current anti-research attitudes would have to change.

At the present moment USAID is being restructured (again). If the Humphrey Bill passes the Agency will be removed from the State Department, but will continue to have a large complex of "development functions" assigned. Nothing in the Bill suggests that T. A. will be singled out for special consideration or that it will be separated from political maneuvering, so I suggest some emphasis on food production as a substitute for such oversight, in the hope that this would make the reorganization a little more historic.

Finally, the reorganization would be especially historic if the new AID would say to one and all, "We are serious about our T. A. dollars and they are reserved for those nations that have demonstrated a commitment to use them effectively." As my friend Keith Roberts observed in this connection, "You can't put new wine in old bottles." So while the donor nations ought to take a good look at the wine they are fermenting, it's largely up to recipient nations to provide the new bottles.

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