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The Elusiveness of Rural Development Theory and Policy: Domestic and Third World Perspectives Joined

Ted K. Bradshaw

ABSTRACT

Rural development in both the Third World and the United States 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.

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.¹

Despite selected successes, rural development in both domestic and Third World settings is in a period of self evaluation and reflection. Critiques explore reasons why programs failed, why we have not learned from successes, or why successful programs have not been replicated in other areas. Ironically, we also are discovering that successful rural development has resulted only partially from direct intervention, but more often from national and international events over which rural developers have no influence such as agricultural prices, political instability, or technological innovations. As well, nondevelopmental policies and programs such as social security, health, or justice often have had an unanticipated positive effect on development (Bradshaw and Blakely, 1987; Hirschl and Summers, 1982).

Rural development efforts in the United States as well as in the Third World continue to search for organizing concepts and theories to guide them. In the Third World the current emphasis has shifted from macroeconomic strategies to efforts toward building better ways to integrate local participation into development projects and to accomplish projects at a local level that make full use of local resources. This ferment finds its parallel in concern about rural development in the United States. While an order of magnitude less desperate, the policy emphasis has shifted from an industrial attraction strategy to local initiatives making use of a wider array of human and natural resources (Blakely, 1989).

Rural development theory and policy for advanced societies will benefit from reflection on Third World development experience. Many concerns are shared, but domestic rural development policy analysis has not built on what is known about development in the Third World. Domestic and Third World 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.

¹For a contrasting perspective, Lewis (1986) 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 (1984:402) concludes, "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."
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. 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; Evans 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 development. Rostow (1960) suggested that with assistance, an underdeveloped society would reach the "take off" point, at which time it would become integrated with the developed world. Modernization became the buzz word, and the expansion of the gross national product (GNP) the indicator. However, as the evidence failed to show that underdeveloped countries would "take off," a sustained and pervasive theory of economic management evolved. Five year plans were drawn to coordinate efforts to unleash the potential of underdeveloped countries, and regional economists dominated development discussions with theories about how to maximize growth and minimize waste. Davies (1984:915) summarized the approach:

Third World countries should endeavour to integrate their economies as quickly as possible into the world market network, and this would be best achieved through government-led, export oriented industrialization in conjunction with commitments from the industrialized countries to develop trade, grant aid, and encourage private investment in the LDC's.

The classical model focused on the role of import substitution, export promotion, liberalization of trade, rationalization of exchange rates, development of industrial infrastructures, and the best utilization of aid.

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2 The utility of the insights from domestic rural development to the Third World is not developed here.
Improved agricultural practices and technology were promoted (more recently) as a means to meet "basic needs."

The problem with the classical approach was that it neglected the political effect of outside (usually developed) countries. Frank (1967) and others in a Neo-Marxian tradition argued that the problems of underdeveloped countries could not be solved with classical economic processes because the developed countries systematically caused poor countries to be "underdeveloped." To some extent, they argued, development is not a problem of economics but of political mobilization to reduce dependency. The political economy paradigm focuses on the nature of the 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 United States. 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 population. Finally, recent literature in the United States has tried to integrate the strategies of industrial growth with community development for local and rural areas (Blakely, 1989).

What is Development?

Development is one of the most imprecisely defined terms in broad use. Hundreds of articles define development in different ways, and rural development
shares few definitional characteristics with other development disciplines such as economic development, political development, and community development. A theoretically fertile concept of development is needed in order for development policy to be more clearly articulated and implemented.

In spite of its elusive quality, recent definitional efforts seem to be converging on several broad aspects of what is meant by development and what is not. For example, development is not simply an increase in the GNP (see Stewart and Streeten, 1984), though increasing well being is desired nearly universally. Being developed is not a single end-state for all societies, nor is it a fixed evolutionary path (see Cardoso and Faletto, 1979), but it is relative to each culture. It is not simply a process independent of goals, though the development process is central to effective development. It is not well represented by a singular focus on major international developmental programs and ideologies that seek to reverse patterns of dependency, establish agriculture as a means for poor people to gain basic necessities, or build patterns of local participation. An effective concept of development needs to embrace multiple perspectives.

Differentiation. Sociology has much to contribute here. A long tradition has called attention to the fact that development is differentiation (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, 1972a: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 payment. 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 in relationships that need to be sustained over long periods of time. Thus, a social system is more interdependent when more complex groups are interwoven in an overlapping, sequential, and reciprocal web of exchange governed by negotiated
rules (Bradshaw and Blakely, 1979). Dependency results when the exchange favors one party over another, generally limiting total system exchange.

Premises of Development

At the root of the contribution of Third World analysis to our purposes are four findings so basic that they are nearly premises of development; and they provide a foundation for ongoing analysis. First, economic growth favoring the poor and less developed regions is not self-starting, self-sustaining, or able to overcome almost Malthusian problems that of their own momentum make conditions worse rather than better. No credible evidence exists that the “development problem” will take care of itself, at least in a short or medium time frame. An associated recurring finding in the development literature is that “regional imbalances tend to grow rather than to diminish if matters are left to the free play of the market.” (De Kadt, 1974:7)

In the language of development introduced here, the premise suggests that differentiation and interdependence are not easily produced. They are costly for an underdeveloped area, and exchanges always favor entities with abundant resources and low needs. When dealing with rural entities with few resources it is clear that appropriately constructed exchange networks need to be established along with more valued and differentiated items with which to strengthen exchange positions. Without continuing effort, exchange positions in less developed areas will erode because others have more knowledge and channels through which to strengthen their position.

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 better than doing nothing.

In addition, there is a growing sense that putting money into rural areas has a pay off similar to or even greater than expenditures in urban areas. Investments in rural areas can help improve wages and living standards of rural people, better utilize natural resources, and create the base for a regional network of small enterprises. (Investments that only benefit outside investors, however, may not be useful for rural development.) The lack of rural investment has meant that the problems of rural areas have been transferred to slums in cities. In major urban areas of developing countries, as in Mexico City, the population crush is nearly unmanageable. The high investment in urban infrastructure required to accommodate rural depopulation may be greater than the investments necessary to make it possible for rural areas to remain viable. The primary example of a viable rural program to slow urbanization is China, though the results of that experiment are not yet clear.

Finally, the case has been made for cultural relativity rather than a fixed concept of progress. The goal of development is not external to society, but integral to it, and when external goals are imposed on a society they tend to be unreachable or may even lead to undesirable consequences. Development is not something that is “done to” a society, but it is at best a process by which a society reaches its own goals. Development in this perspective does not anticipate continual outside assistance but self-reliance. While the elimination of poverty and social misery is generally common to all development efforts, each society makes its own trade-offs between this goal and other goals, between different ways of reaching the goal, and between competing visions of the long-term future. Moreover, attention to cultural conditions is more than just a value appropriate to development, it is practical and efficient as well.

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.

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 exchange is separable from the problem of the terms and character of exchange. The high visibility of the two traditions in Third World development calls this distinction clearly to mind.

The two development perspectives are actually interrelated. People will be better off to the extent that: (1) they have resources (products, human skills, infrastructure capacity); and (2) the ability to control the terms of exchange and trade of these resources for other things they need. Specialized and differentiated resources without the ability to benefit from them are no more useful to a developing rural area than participatory structures which have nothing to provide.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTROL WITHIN SOCIAL STRUCTURE</th>
<th>RESOURCE SPECIALIZATION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Isolated, dependent</td>
<td>Constrained, Limited</td>
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<td>Open, interdependent</td>
<td>Abundant, Integrated</td>
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<th>1 Survival</th>
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<td>3 Inefficient</td>
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<td>4 Self-sustaining</td>
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Figure 1
Typology of Developmental Problems
Based on this formulation, it is easy to see that rural areas face different types of development problems based on the historical condition of the particular society or area with regard to their resource availability and capacity to control. These two aspects of development may be organized into a simple four cell table (figure 1) that shows typical development problems faced by areas in which resources are either constrained or abundant, and in which the social structure is either isolated and dependent or open and interdependent.

Cell 1, the classic case of an underdeveloped rural area, lacks both resources and the "social infrastructure" to either get resources or to participate in exchanges. The main problem is one of survival, a pressing crisis that takes up all available resources and organizational capacity. Local based participatory programs are ideally suited for this type of situation because they tap individual aspirations, pool resources, control exploitation, and build lasting skills and patterns of exchange. Outside help is usually needed, and gains should be balanced between continued investment and local consumption. (Irrigation and housing programs in the Third World are good examples of successful programs.) These projects are expensive and local; they depend largely on the skill and persistence of project leaders, and they are not conducive to the rapid reduction of poverty. Nonetheless, the laborious process of building a flow of resources while, at the same time, building a network of exchange must be done at a community level through much developer intervention.

Cell 2, is a society with abundant resources but is isolated and dependent. Typically, this is an export oriented area exploited by outsiders, and the main problem is one of motivating people to create new outlets for its capacity. It is often the case that resource availability in these areas is highly specialized in one area (e.g., products) but underdeveloped in other areas (such as managerial skills). Rural communities facing these problems need to seek alternatives to the existing constraining patterns of exploitation. Programs to do this are often politically sensitive, though development does not need to involve national political issues. Community development strategies, especially those that develop leadership, are essential because organizational capacity is lacking.

Cell 3 includes societies or communities with another form of unbalanced development. These societies are inefficient. They have extensive social organizations but they have limited resources with which to participate in exchanges. The concept goes further to include societies with good internal markets but limited goods to sell. Programs for this development problem involve economic development strategies that create a flow of resources and capacities within the available institutional structure rather than industrial location efforts which simply bring in outsider firms and 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.

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, rather than an 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 international relations disadvantage underdeveloped areas. The problem is not just in the fact that profits are removed; the local capacity is diminished as branch plants and other transnational corporate activities in underdeveloped regions block local participation. In a recent article, O'Hearn (1989) examined post-war economic development in Ireland, which since mid-1950s has pursued an export oriented approach, enticing foreign plants through policies of no taxation, free trade, and no or few restrictions on the firm's operation. Foreign plants were seen as "a substitute for-not a complement to-domestic industry" (O'Hearn, 1989:580). He points out that this strategy of not integrating the foreign plants into the domestic economy is in sharp contrast to the strategy of the developing countries such as South Korea and Taiwan which utilized foreign industry in a controlled way. The failure to avoid dependence on the foreign firms in Ireland led to both slow economic growth and rising inequality. Although not quite Third World, Ireland illustrates the problem rural communities face when they become too dependent on outside firms, which could be interdependent with the local economy if policy has been favorable to such an initiative.

Thus, if the problem of underdevelopment is the lack of control and, as a consequence, dependency, the solution is viable alternatives. This means alternative means of transportation, alternative ways of making a living, alternative markets for production, and other alternatives. The literature on the Third World
makes clear that the process of providing alternatives is difficult, that many alternatives are not real to the people who need them (e.g., they remain afraid or uninformed), that many alternatives compete with each other in the development process (e.g., too much concentration on 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.

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 bound 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).

If we view development as a mess, it is fruitless to assume that the goal of development programs is to find the one most efficient way to use resources, to devise formulas that target closely and systematically the areas to receive investments, to schedule projects that must be completed before other projects, or to favor strategies that will have the maximum measurable results. As Landau and Chisholm (1988) point out, such policy optimism is unwarranted, and a better strategy is to be pessimistic about the ability of policy (such as development
policy) to achieve its goals. If the assumption is that any one program will largely fail, then the best strategy is to have multiple, redundant programs, some of which can be expanded if they seem to be beneficial or abandoned quickly if they are not. (See Landau, 1972; Landau and Chisholm, 1988).

Third World development literature warns that comprehensive programs are not viable. In the first place, the development problems are so different from one place to another that a comprehensive strategy that does not accommodate these differences is bound to fail. Efforts to centralize development are often misguided since developing areas predominantly lack agreement on the values to be pursued or the techniques to be employed (often both); in such cases centralization increases the risks of failure. A current movement in development circles of “participatory development” in which greater reliance is placed on local agenda setting and implementation, with outside assistance, counters this tendency.

**Conclusion**

This paper has concentrated on those conceptual problems of development illustrated by studies in the Third World. Hundreds of practical articles 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 (e.g., rural banking reform), fail to coordinate development efforts (training, natural resource, infrastructure, and other programs do not get packaged properly), and they have weak involvement with the people who are to be served.

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