

World Water '83 : The world problem.

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DISCUSSION ON PAPERS 15 AND 16

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I speak from the perspective of the social scientist. I have worked in a dozen countries (mostly in Asia) in recent years with seven UN agencies, with non-government organisations and consultancy firms.

I have been particularly concerned with the view of the 'recipient', 'beneficiary' or consumer'. My discipline is that of looking back up at the planning, technology and development as conceived by us, the professionals, and identifying the gaps, the inconsistencies, the conflicts, the distortions and more rarely the successes as they show up in the reality of the rural villages.

Our view of reality is often determined and obscured by our familiar way of looking and thinking about things. The mention of the importance of the role of the community implies a reality which is deceptive. The 'people' side of development remains an icon to which we pay some obeisance before conference delegates hurry back to massive effluents from massive plants in astonishing landscapes. The money which we have heard so surprisingly is in abundance must I suppose flow in these directions.

The vanishing community participation might be demonstrated by a review I have recently made of 80 countries where water projects are provided by an international agency which is a leader in its strong commitment to the social elements of development. It's Board of Directors has made it mandatory that community participation must be an integral part of every project.

Of the 80 countries, 45 provide no information on such matters at all. Twelve provide a cryptic phrase or two, and together with twelve more (of the remaining 23), indicate that free labour is the role ascribed to the community. If interpreted generously (e.g. some suggestions regarding the site selection of distribution points), merely eleven of the 80 indicate that the community plays some part in planning. Of these only three expect the community to provide information and just one community in the 80 is expected to be involved in evaluation.

Perceptive engineers are puzzled why communities do not carry out or sustain simple maintenance and grow concerned that facilities are breaking down at alarming rates or are not being used as planned. Sometimes they resort to calling in people like me, but this is usually just for a couple of weeks to fix up some kind of 'health education' - a kind of cherry on the top, after the event.

We planners and the village people live in different realities, and little has been done to find common ground and set up true partnerships of interest so that a community will believe that a facility is theirs, that they will benefit and that they **have a shared** responsibility, with their part spelled out in specific and acceptable terms. For example, take our concern regarding water-borne diseases and the ideas we have that health is a priority matter. Unfortunately, villagers (especially in arid zones) are primarily concerned with the survival of their animals. Animals are an enormous capital investment; are the prime sources of energy, and are an important food source. Children, I am sorry to say, are obviously a high risk commodity and unlike animals are readily and prolifically replaceable.

A comment has been made on the advantages of drinking water and sanitation having been separated from other water concerns in the international Decade. However, I believe that unless we look at village priorities and village realities as a whole (animals, the extension of growing seasons by irrigation and so on), we will never get our concerns high enough on the villagers' list of priorities. Of course, water is highly prized and water is an excellent 'entry point' and could be the boost to demonstrate serious intent for overall and equitable development. **But the health impact of water will, from the villagers' point of view, have to ride on the back of their major concerns and the proof of attention to what are to them fundamental matters.**

In one village I found the headman was somehow chairman of 43 committees, growing from directives arising bewilderingly from government sources requiring village efforts and resources. As effective administration and support rarely gets far beyond the district level, villagers have no idea of really what is expected of them, and how and in what order or manner they could comply even if they did. More often than not, each of the 43 different authorities is totally unaware of what the other 42 are up to or what the cumulative demands on the attention and efforts of the villagers would really amount to. The inevitable result is that the villagers shake their heads and carry on the best way they know how, which has served well enough for millennia, never expecting anything good or positive from outside. They are understandably suspicious of intrusion and will do well enough thank you given their condition without our bright and impractical ideas which apparently demand more from them than they can deliver or absorb and are unlikely to bring them much in return.

I have seen multi-million dollar programmes supplying water in such a way as to very efficiently carry water-borne diseases where there had been little or no water to do it previously. I have seen public resources (in water and otherwise) only too blatantly 'captured' by the local elite resulting in the widening of the gap between the haves and the have-nots. This can lead directly away from any initial positive and altruistic intentions of development into the burgeoning of bitter resentment and frustration, providing the trigger for violence, political instability and revolution.

Although by definition in developing countries we are working in volatile political situations, and coups, revolution and war frequently lead to the destruction or breakdown of systems from neglect, cost/benefit analysis rarely considers such risks. Such a context is not considered our concern; such familiar are treated as unusual, surprising and unaccountable

events. Such mayhem does, however, lead to the requirement for more hardware and reinstallation each time, but how much of this kind of investment reaches the poorest of the poor? To reach these people is one of the major objectives of the Decade, and of the primary health care context in which it is to take place, and much of the purpose of the concept of development itself.

There is no question that cities and peri-urban areas are dreadful and need attention but they pre-empt our resources, ingenuity and expertise. Unlike urban growth in the West, where a large 'pull' factor was at work related to the economic opportunities of the first industrial revolution, the masses of Asia, Africa and Latin America are 'pushed', largely fleeing from economic breakdown, dispossession, political conflict and starvation. It is imperative on a global scale to turn attention to the reconstruction of rural economies and maintain rural community life and support systems.

This is why - and it is my plea here - **we must place the social aspects of our development efforts firmly on the agenda, not as part of a missionary philosophy but as part of a technical necessity for rational change and even global survival.**

I have worked long in trying to place social community inspired planning into our more familiar planning processes. It can be done but **needs a serious commitment for a true (rather than lip-service) multi-disciplinary approach. We must link village realities and village priorities and our own into a creative and liberating cohesive whole.** The community must become a trusted partner from the beginning (there are already some very effective techniques for doing this). They must be respected contributors in the process of policy-formulation, decision-making, and all the steps down to implementation and evaluation for those plans which are intended to change their lives. The community must not be regarded sentimentally or just as cheap labour, or as an afterthought when our plans are seen to fail. We must find ways of planning together.

Is it too much to envisage that every drop of water we can bring to those in need will help to generate nation building and the kind of world we can only just dream about now in 1983?

David Drucker, London, UK 1983