

Report on the Central International Event of the International
Exposition of Rural Development
at the Princeton Club, March 12, 1984
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I am very pleased that there are several people in the room who were at India. As you may imagine, it is very difficult to report totally on an event such as this. I think one of the very unique things about the event in Delhi was that 70% of the participants actually worked at the grassroots level. The rest were professionals, people who write and think about development, people who give away money for development, people who make decisions about rural development and government ministries. That kind of composition in itself is worth emphasizing. All too often, we tend to get involved in just discussing the development without really bringing in those people who are themselves practising development.

I felt that the way this was organized, as a non-academic affair, with the emphasis on interaction and networking was really rewarding and made me feel that this differed very much from other conferences. The most important thing about the event was that the people who think they know about development by virtue of having read the books, and I include myself in that category, were not there to talk to those people who do development at the grassroots level which is the usual thing. We were there to listen and I and others I spoke to felt rewarded by not being put in the driver's seat but in the back seat. This forced us to read things or reflect on the limitations of our own kind of "professional world" outlook on development. This is not to suggest that those of us with professional experience or who are managers or consultants in this field have nothing to offer. However, if you think in terms of balance, we tend far too often to design and carry the day with our own ideas. These are very often above the heads of the people who are themselves much more experienced but not necessarily able to articulate their ideas as well as we are. I felt in all humility that this was one of the unique aspects that made many of us present think twice about how we do development in the rural areas of the world. To this extent the event was something that should be seen as a milestone in order to emphasize its significance.

Related to this was that people who work with rural development projects in various parts of the world are very often working in an isolated environment. They often have no perspective on the significance of what they are involved in. True they know that what they do means something to the community but they don't know about its significance globally or even nationally. Among the 650 participants, the bulk of them were people who had really never been to a conference before, at least not outside their own country. They were able to meet people who don't speak their language but who share the same experience and spoke to each other through experience. This brought a new dimension to global thinking and global experience in this particular field.

Many people whom I know had never been out of their own country before; people who, in East Africa, were extremely hesitant, almost shivering when they spoke to someone like myself because I happen to

be the representative of an international organization. Many of these returned back to their home countries and communities much more confident about the significance of what they do. They felt that they were part of the world, part of a movement that is in the making. I felt very encouraged seeing some of our contacts in East Africa maturing and growing in terms of their own stature as a result of this particular experience.

Now let me say a few words about the exposition and how it was organized. You'll find this chart in your materials:

CENTRAL INTERNATIONAL EVENT: FORMAT										
THE SYMPOSIUM			THE FIELD VISITS				THE ASSEMBLY			
S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W
1. Inauguration 2. Phase I Review 3. Identifying the Focus of the Exposition 4. Field Visit Context			1. Travel to Projects 2. Village Tours and Research 3. Report Writing 4. Travel to Delhi				1. Workshop "Keys of Approaches that Work" 2. Document Writing 3. Phase III Planning 4. Plenary and Formal Closing			

Let me comment on the three phases of the Exposition. The first few days were devoted to actually sharing experiences primarily through an exhibition hall displaying all the projects that had been selected. In the bulk of the participating countries, steering committees chose what they considered to be the most successful approaches to be shared with the rest of the world. All these were exhibited. Some had only photographs on the wall with, very often, a handwritten description of what it was. However, whether it was simple or whether it was more sophisticated, the most important thing was that people went around asking questions, looking at the pictures and trying to know more about each other's experience. While I personally was not there for this particular stage, virtually everybody I spoke to said that this was a very important way of communicating what was working at the very local level. There was a sharing of experiences that was very useful and revealed things that people had not thought of. Perhaps this stage was even a bit short.

The second phase of the 10 day event was the four days spent in the field. Everyone went out in groups of about twelve to fourteen different states of India. They visited various projects selected to provide good illustrations of both the problems of rural development in India and some of the encouraging results that demonstrate things can be done at the local level. For most people the field visit, if not the highlight, was a very important learning experience. Like the first phase of the conference, it provided more live illustrations and opportunities to discuss and learn from others. In spite of linguistic hurdles, there was a communication of both ideas and experiences that was greatly appreciated. I went back to one of those projects visited the week after the event. I was told that even from their point of view, it had not just been a question of offering hospitality to twelve people. It had been something that had also provided a learning experience for the Indian hosts. I was glad to hear that and rest convinced that there was a reciprocity in that

particular part of the event as well.

The third phase, the last few days, were devoted to first of all taking stock of the field events but, primarily and most importantly, looking forward to what to do after the event was over. When I first heard about this, I was very glad that the organizers of this event had thought of the importance of follow up. Too many conferences of this kind end up without there being any mechanism for actually taking this further. I was particularly pleased in this case to see that the organizers had built in two days devoted to how this could be carried forward at the national and regional levels in different parts of the world.

First of all, people were organized into interest groups. For instance, those who were concerned with women were in one group, those concerned with cooperatives in another, public health in another and so on. They shared experiences and concerns in their particular field.

The last day was a shift from an interest focus to a geographical focus. I think doing both of those were good because it provided a chance to look at a particular sector or area in which you had a definite interest but also to share the question of what to do next with people from the same part of the world as you. The discussions both in the interest groups and in the geographical groups were very interesting.

From my own perspective, it's fair to say that the real challenge and the test of success in the long run will be the extent to which the participants from different parts of the world will be able to translate and implement anything that was agreed upon at the meeting. I think something will come out. Definitely it will be easier in some contexts than in others. For instance the 13 or 14 countries representing Africa were all placed in one group. Personally, I had my doubts whether it was really possible to accomplish any united strategy on the basis of such a large grouping. I think, with due respect to the organizers, that the Africa group was probably the weakest in terms of being able to come to any agreement. Not because they lacked the interest, but simply because there was the problem of trying to reach a consensus between Egyptians and Zimbabweans, between Senegalese and Kenyans and so on. This is one of those things to be accepted but poses a particular challenge to us when it comes to the implementation and work beyond the actual event in New Delhi.

As part of this final event, I was honoured to chair a special session on funding strategies for the rural poor. I was glad to see that around the table of about this size, there were 30 people representing funding agencies, government as well as international private organizations involved in supporting rural development. We had a very useful discussion on the problems of actually getting funds to the rural poor. I think everybody-particularly people representing government and representing donors, the larger donors, whether it's the intergovernmental United Nations system or the bilateral donors like the USAID or the C/SIDAs of the donor community - they all face great problems in actually finding the mechanisms and the channels for funds to go at least beyond the governments and the already

privileged groups down to the areas where the rural poor are, where a lot of action is possible but where very often funds do not provide any support.

I don't have time to comment on all the points we agreed upon, both in the constraints we identified or, more importantly the recommendations we made. However, by and large, there was a feeling that governments and donors have to rethink a number of strategies. For example, how to actually mobilize local resources. Another was how to tap the potential that is no doubt available and, as this Exposition particularly confirmed, available in rural communities throughout the world. On the whole, there was the sense that the community of donors and governments should, as much as possible, try to ensure that they provide the support and encouragement for local efforts. Efforts that can be made by people on their own initiative rather than as happens all too often, designed and implemented above the heads of people in the rural areas, projects that might be helpful and beneficial to these people but which do not actually involve them at all. We agreed that, rather than using a blueprint that assumes if you only follow what has been designed you will get your projects successfully implemented, we should think more about what needs to be done to provide the climate that allows these people who have proved already that they can do things to do more. That kind of recommendation is obviously one that will take time to implement but one that needs to be stressed over and over again.

I was glad to see that the people from these institutions, governments and donors were generally in agreement. In fact, one representative of a major donor institution said, "The problem is not funds. The problem is one of trying to find an approach that allows our organization to channel the funds in such a way that they become supportive and complementary to the efforts of the local people." That is something that all of us have almost a responsibility, a moral responsibility, to take seriously and as much as possible influence those people who don't yet realize this. This is necessary to ensure that the kind of blockages and obstacles that do exist can be dealt with so that funds can be more effectively channelled and that the rural development done by the rural people themselves can be more effectively accomplished.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have nothing else to say except that it was a unique and successful event. However, I would stress again the challenge both for those who were there and those who are here. It is to ensure that what was learned, the momentum that was built during the Exposition can somehow be maintained. To that extent everybody who is seriously interested in associating himself or herself with or in supporting this great effort should look carefully at the questions of where do we go from here and how can we support those efforts we agree as necessary and how we do that most effectively.