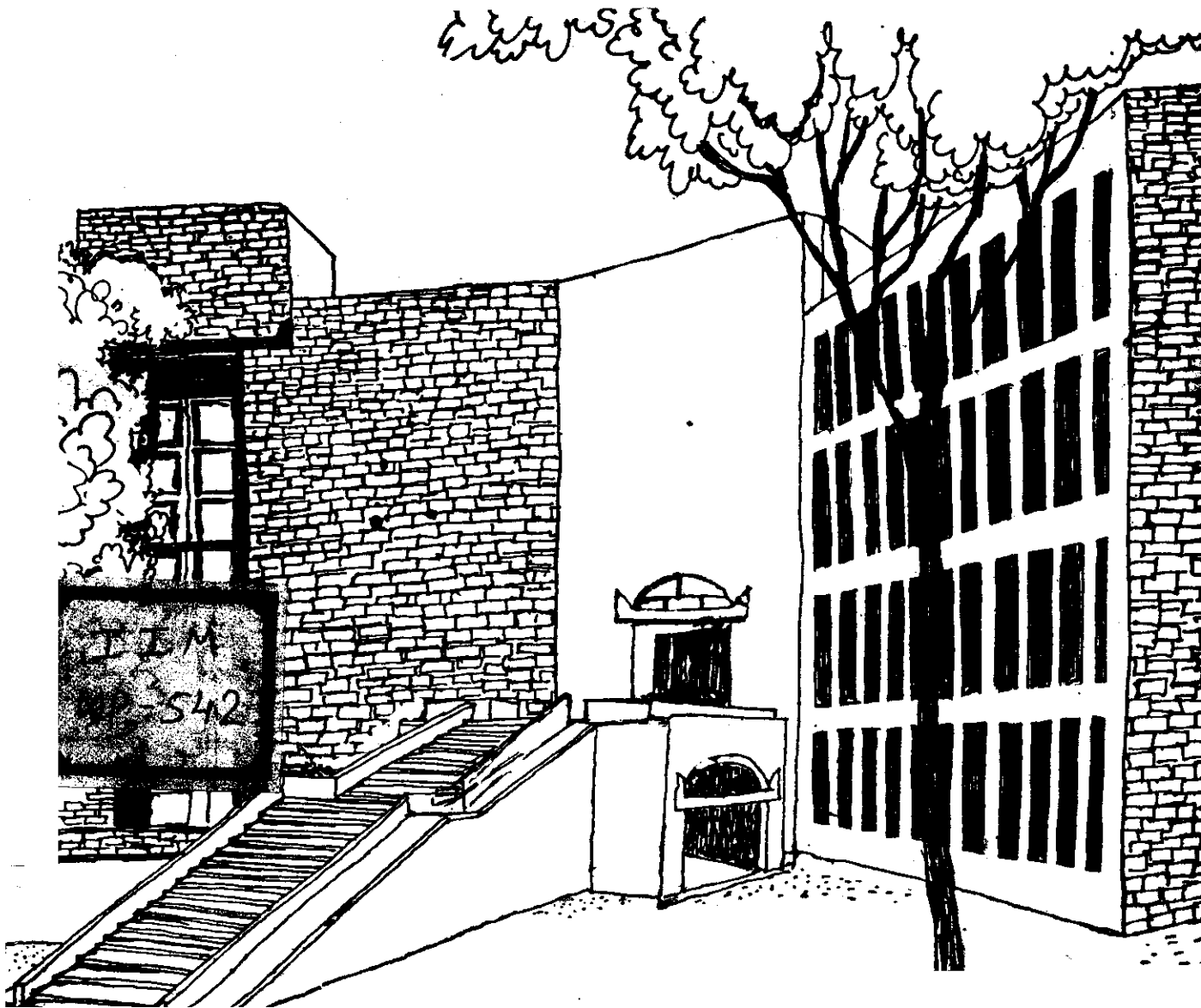


Working Paper



WHY DON'T WE LEARN!

By

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Why don't we learn!

Monitoring barriers to 'our' learning
through 'their' knowledge

Abstract

Rural development is essentially a process of widening decision-making options of the majority of the poor. Creating choices without generating capacity to act might impair learning abilities of both, who create choices and also those who have to exercise these. Development agents, institutions and organizations often recognize after the fact that they failed to keep track of their learning vis-a-vis the learning of those with/for whom they worked. Cost of their learning is paid for by the poor who learn sometimes to be helpless. This paper lists certain aspects of mutual-monitoring for appropriate learning at both the ends. Development experimentation involves costs which are often paid by those who benefit least from it.

Policy planners seem to know all about why developmental programmes fail and yet we have not learnt to be impatient with failures? Why don't we learn! How do we learn from those who have learned to live with our ignorance! The paper lists a few theorems on monitoring and learning besides identifying areas of future research.

Why don't we learn:

As a society, we have learned to live with a very wide range of contradictions. This homeostatic capacity is also the reason of our failure. Social Scientists and Acadomist-Planners have intellectualised the debate on development so much that reducing poverty by redefining poverty line consumed more space and energy than describing and participating in the struggle which poor were waging against various odds. Result is a 'self-reference' frame in which learning is impossible. I have no intention to pass judgements over motives of others. However I will like to earn the right to critically appraise experience in developmental learning by mapping lessons from partly my own failures.

The paper is organised in three parts. In part one, logic of learning is discussed, part two deals with some theorems on monitoring which are not fully expanded here. Hopefully discussion on the same will help achieve greater clarity and in part three, issues for further research are listed. In a way, part two and three overlap.

Part - One

Logic of learning:

Before, I speculate upon the logic of learning let me hypothesise some reasons for not learning both in organised and unorganised settings:

We don't learn because -

- (a) cost of non-learning is borne by somebody else
- (b) benefits from learning are not sure and sufficient
- (c) learning leads to discrediting, disowning of previous options or changing discount rates of future options
- (d) "my learning is not enough, others must also learn"

Some implications of 'learning' in developmental organizations could be.

1. Reduction in sensitivity (you become thick skinned)
2. Increased tolerance of inefficiencies
3. Increased contempt for clients who can't learn to deal with organizations
4. Increased vulnerability if more and more variables in the causal model of change were made exogenous.

Finally redundancy* increases beyond the creative level.

How do we generate learning environment in organized setting:

If information was in essence, a theory of making the possible actual, learning occurred when information could be discriminated from 'data'. A priori theory which connected various variables in a change process thus had to iteratively undergo revision, if learning had to be manifested. Uncertainty was a necessary condition, though not sufficient for extracting information from any

* Redundancy accords stability, provide 'extra ration' of predictability and reduces chances of error. Too much of it obviously implies extra-ordinary risk-aversion.

message. If we knew all the answers, we stopped learning.* How do we describe a problem often determines whether we will try to solve it and if yes, how will we go about it. Magnifying imponderables rationalise inactivity, particularly on the part of intellectuals. On the other hand highly definitive claims of learning about the problems precluded experimentation. Uncertainty was a double edged sword.

Learning requires messages with low entropy**. Saying what we want alongwith stating precisely what we don't may lead to a low entropy message. Eclectic pronouncements sometime prevent effective communication. Phrase "community participation" may be less useful than more straight forward substitution by assetless, marginal farmers, low income artisans etc.

Monitoring, thus became a process of generating low entropy messages at both the ends of a development process : The poor and the 'poverty - alleviators'. How do we do it? Is it inevitable that we must state precisely what we know what we did not besides what we were prepared to disown before we even think of developing a line of communication with poor?

* A good example of this would be the agenda notes for 'conference of ministers in-charge of Rural Development (September 4&5 1984); Ministry of rural development, New Delhi. An excerpt from the preamble is given in annexure to demonstrate both the philosophy of development and governments plan to implement it.

** J Campbell in his book 'Grammatical Man', Suwien and Schuster, U.S. 1982 illustrates this concept at a great length. Orderly contrast of what is wanted and what is not, high and low temperature, dark and light colour are the cases of low entropy. On the other hand ^{concept} like noise, when contrasts have been ~~mentioned~~, the entropy increases: 'Below poverty line' is such a concept.

Part - Two

Some theorems on Monitoring

1. A change not monitored is a change not desired

- Banks did not monitor in which seasons, spaces or ecological contexts, what sectoral enterprises will be most viable
- To what extent credit portfolio of different branches matched with portfolio of multi-market diversified enterprises of poor households in different regions
- Programmes on Cooperatives did not monitor who became members initially but dropped out subsequently, whether there existed a pattern in the population of drop outs, whether cooperatives of unequals ineffect forged the cooperation/collusion amongst the better off and that too at public cost, whether cooperatives had regular general body meetings, whether development was really a positive sum game etc.
- If dry fodder prices increased in drought prone regions as much as cereal prices (unprecedented in history) in some years, to what extent dairy development programmes and policies responded to such signals; why did not they monitor such changes!
- If average size of loan needed/demanded by most poor in backward regions was in hundreds and if minimum average size of bank loan was in thousands, whether portfolio shift was monitored?
- If restoration of ecological balance in dry region implied judicious mix of public and private investments, why should major part of the expenditure have been on only a few sectors disregarding the need mix (particularly livestock like sheep and goat and craft activities etc) of majority of vulnerable populations.

2. Monitoring access implies designing counters and not corridors.

- We first design a system with back-doors and side-windows, then monitor the access at the front window. Finding not enough people or not enough of the 'target type' we exhort the indifferent excluded ones to organise themselves. To generate pressure/demand, from those who failed to get the services, on the delivery system which failed to deliver became the dominant moral of the developmental story
- Whenever resources were scarce, queuing was inevitable. How to define eligibility rules for standing in the ^{queue,} through whom to monitor data on exclusion
 - those who in fact managed to elbow out the rest
 - those who could not participate
 - those who would not participate* despite knowing the pros and also the cons
 - those who were not eligible either because they had too much of resources or too little

It does not have to be said that different answers will emerge depending upon the channel from which data is collected. The issue really is that when implicitly by design, the corridors in the form of scope for negotiating the possible meaning of a policy are allowed, access across counters (i.e. the delivery windows) gets distorted. To monitor the effectiveness of counters, one has also to monitor the corridors. Designing counters also implies defining precise rules of queuing. The exclusion will have to be monitored through those who are normatively desired to be in the queue (even if they chose not to stand in the queue).

* It should be noted that this is not an imaginary category : In many backward districts, as much as 30 - 50% IRDP families refused to take loan.

3. Monitoring 'deviance' to build self-design potential of developmental organisations is sine qua non of building up organic learning systems.

One of the implications of eco-specific planning is to have a wide range of variety in both organisational design, policy content and delivery systems. However, tendency of centralised monitoring systems to concentrate on uniform standard indicators reinforces risk-averse compliant behaviour amongst the functionaries of organisations.

At the same time, it is inevitable that there would be minority in various organisations, governmental or non-governmental which will deviate from the norms. In our obsession with failures, we seldom seem to be capable of anticipating success. The result is outliers, wherever they exist, are either suppressed or ignored. There are several reasons for this behaviour including a fear that dominant coalition in these organisations may be exposed if their standards of sensitivity towards people were surpassed by some junior people.

Thus, if every other sub-set of society is assumed conflict ridden, should bureaucracy be imagined as a homogenous system?

The question then arises, how to spot, sustain, and strengthen organisational insurgents! If a miniscule minority in different bureaucratic organisations demonstrated not only its

It may be useful to mention here that this implication of success is distinctly different from the other popular notions of the same which include some of the national level programmes particularly in Dairy Sector.

sensitivity to the problem of poor but also recognised the power of other peers having nexus with vested interests to thwart its efforts how to ensure that such a minority in the organisations will not be annihilated?

How to generate a critical net-work which will provide moral and material support to such deviants and also enable their strategic coalition, tactical retreats, etc. Perhaps only a network of such deviants could sustain each other by providing critical feed back, monitoring their errors, extracting lesson of each failure and moral of each success. Unlike the already existing coalitions of vested interests within and outside the public organizations or NGOs, it was possible that this net work of deviants might not initially get full support of minority of poor in each of the village in the hinterland of these organisations. One can be sure however, that pursuit of deviance in rural society as well as in organisations will be quite a learning process.

4. Poor monitor our naivette if they don't organise despite cost effectiveness of organisation assumed by us, they are trying to survive in the short run.

Using logic of collective action through calculus of benefit-cost ratio or power-inequities, exchange economies etc., some people conclude that emergence of free riders in a collective system was unavoidable as long as there were people who could get away with using common resource without paying its costs. This was inevitable if no third party system to provide assurance against free-riding

was available by state or any other social system. On the other hand there were others who wondered why poor did not realise that it was in their interest to organise. Naivette seldom had limits.

An illustrative scenario looks like this "If people don't pay bank loans, they must not be aware of the advantages that follow of repayment; those who pay develop, those who did not, were doomed." Having so stated the story we devise the solution of appointing volunteers who would follow up the loans not paid by meek and mighty, organise them at a salary/stipend of say Rs.400 to Rs.600 per month coupled with all the risks and uncertainty of job.*

Development on cheap says a learned friend, is a bane of our poverty alleviating programming.** We want to spend millions through systems and institutions that are maintained at less than optimal cost. Poor people monitor our intentions behind these programmes by looking at the investment in the monitoring processes, learning systems etc.

It is not rare to visit a village and be confronted with questions, "What is your scheme, what do you want to give, how many cases do you want, why don't you leave us on our fate, etc. etc.". At the same time these were many who were just different.

*Volunteers have been pointed not only by certain knowledgeable experienced organizations but also by state governments to organise rural workers, perhaps to convert, as Siffin said, a lion's den into a happy zoo!

**I am grateful to Prof. Manu Shroff for this point which figured during our informal discussion on developmental alternatives as a part of an action-research project in Jhabua, a tribal drought prone district.

Our vision of their long term interests and their compulsions of their short term survival seldom coincide.

The cost at which we want to develop them, and the costs which they have already paid for surviving so long also very seldom match. It is time, we re-calibrate our barometers of learning.

5. Converting marginal investors into developmental entrepreneurs requires developing public risk absorption mechanisms.

Different classes of farmers and labourers face different degrees of risk, have different historical experiences of success or failures and thereby have different futures expectations.

How to ensure that risks of those who are intended to be made investors are insured so as to unfold their entrepreneurial potential! Thus, if a IRDP asset fetched lesser than expected income and not merely because management was poor, market was depressed or some other natural contingency, who would bear the burden? Who will ensure the risk of not getting loan at all from the informal market if moratorium on repayment of informal dues was placed? Monitoring these costs was necessary, some believe, though not the planners!

Very often by assuming much lesser degree of investment risks in developmental programmes, the planners passed on the entire burden of risks on the investors. Implementing officials

at time quite judiciously recognised this and thus did not choose the poorest for the purpose. (At least they deserve commendation for this!)

Numerous examples exist in which government has not provided, any appreciable process of risk absorption. Insurance systems were known for their singular inefficiency. Question thus arises, how do we develop risk diffusing, negotiating and absorption system as an inalienable component of development policy so that poor don't choose to remain out?

6. 'Monitoring context changes the content.'

There is a famous story of Birbal, who when asked to shorten a line without rubbing it, draw a longer line adjacent to it. Very often we monitor the content without even realising the enormous variety of difference in the meanings which may emerge because of the differences in the context. Voluntary agencies many times forge dependency amongst the poor when concentration is placed on physical investments rather than on capacity creation.

It is important to realize that by monitoring the context i.e., the setting in which a programme had to be implemented, we would inevitably design better policies, programmes and projects. But the reverse was not true. The tragedy is that often we monitored only the content. The result was that despite highly heterogeneous implementation of the policy, solution often was, more of the same.

Context comprised, most importantly, the contours of coping mechanisms of poor. How little we know of them was apparent from the stylised statements as poverty littered all over the plan documents.

7. Camps and Campaigns, the ultimate weapon in the arsenal of developmental planners to 'shoot' the 'targets', confirm the contempt the planners have towards the concept of participation.

Often in the name of decentralised planning and implementation, bureaucratic machinery chose to organise camps and campaigns to demonstrate its apparent anxiety to deliver results through people's participation. But what do these camps and campaigns really achieve?

- : The participation ends where it should begin
- : Routine is converted into celebration
- : People are immobilized in normal times such that every camp generates a greater need for still another camp
- : Tolerance or homeostatic level of people as well as bureaucratic officials, increased so much that unless camps or campaigns were held, system did not perform its normal activities. People as well as officials were desensitised.
- : People often interpreted the camps as a sign of helplessness on the part of senior officials who failed to galvanise their machinery to act in the absence of it (camps).
- : Need for internal tension to generate pressure for action was not probably by creating external pressure through these camps.

Nobody need be reminded about what happened after the camps or campaigns were over. The absurdity of this approach could be

gauzed from the fact that some of the patently obvious acts of routine nature in various organizations/delivery systems had to be recalled and celebrated through camps e.g., a bank celebrating customer - service week, district collectorate organizing mutation camps or the now famous credit-camps.

There is a need to systematically catalogue such camouflage attempts to seek participation of people. While one can understand periodic reminders about major objectives of any organization, treating them as substitutes for regular activities betrayed sincerity.

Some other questions needing further exploration.

1. How to create capacity in groups of poor to control and monitor the leaders?

Very often the poor recognised the need for literate and articulated leader who in their view could be able to understand the logic of bureaucratic systems. These leaders, some times after repeated interactions with bureaucratic functionaries, themselves start realizing the futility of having detailed interactions with their peers. Soon, these leaders loose the confidence of poor but the latter have very limited capacity to dislodge them.*

* This is also true in many of the so called representative trade unions.

Above scenario represents a very familiar experience of voluntary agencies, cooperative organizations and village panchayats. Most social interventionists have neglected the need of instituting processes of accountability and openness in leader-follower interface.

Risk, resources and skills are considered three fulcra on which any developmental activity has to be modelled. Often modern management interventions presume need for deskilling as the basis of any organized activity. Specialization in skills traditionally was a source of ^{multiple} leadership. Since rural social structures required multiple skills for survival, specialists in one skill became natural leader of the task groups around that skill. Same leader had to become follower in another task group. Iteration of leadership, specialization of skills and delinking* of pooling and redistribution have been found in some of traditional tribal groups as the pre-requisites of an open, accountable group which could provide for containment of hierarchies and concurrent control of leaders through monitoring by followers. The individual risks differentials are managed through delinking of pooling and redistribution.

Need for pursuing these propositions remained, if viable collectivities of poor had to emerge. Question is, shall we the interventionists, agree to be monitored ourselves?

* This is contrary to the modern assumption of human economic behaviour.

2. How to generate capacity amongst poor to monitor governmental programmes/projects and organizations?

Organizational leaders often pass on the blame for inefficient and ineffective functioning of developmental programmes on to the lowest rung of bureaucracy.** Credit, unlike blame, seldom trickles down. In the process, the distrust amongst leaders and followers in public organizations transcends the organizational boundaries and is manifested in the relation between organizational functionaries and the poor clients.

How do we identify role for desired* target group to monitor the extent to which programme reached following subsets of target group:

- a. Desired but devoid of technological as resource potential for using the project/programme resource.
- b. People with potential but not belonging to the normatively defined category of desired group.
- c. People neither having potential nor belonging to the desired group.

Governmental efforts for generating potential amongst the desired target group would also need to be monitored to test the intentions of planners.

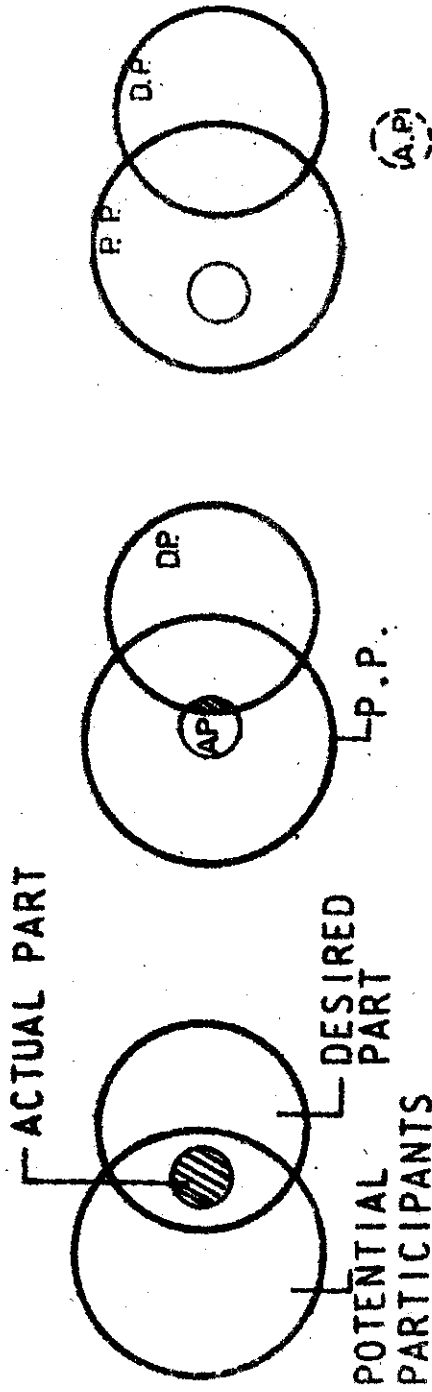
There is a need to open up public systems to popular scrutiny.

If desired and potential target group implied subset d + and p, the actual users of organizational resources could be somewhere in AU. See figure on page 15(a)

In our project in Jhabua, we tried precisely to test this notion by developing detailed perceptive cases on 'institutionalised' poverty by working with village Patwaris, ULW, teachers, and, managers and field officers of regional rural bank. They inturn pursued the problems of a poor family through multiple visits for 2-3 months.

P 15-A

FIGURE



A NO LEAKAGE

B % LEAKAGE

C 100% LEAKAGE

MONITORING PARTICIPATION IN PROJECTS

GUPTA ANIL K.
Ref. EKISTICS 29A(1981)
134-442

- : displaying outside a veterinary or human dispensary, the list of villages from which patients had been treated, the number of landless provided support, key diseases/^{identified} and dispensation provided etc. Sharing of information hopefully would provide concrete anchor for crystallizing the popular discontent and introduce wider accountability.
- : for which purpose, how many loans had been given by banks in which villages also needed to be shared amongst the people. It will provide access to poor to pressurise the institutions to reorient their portfolios seasonally, sectorally and spatially.
- : villagewise birth rates need be publicly displayed castewise and possibly class-wise; literacy levels, proportion of school drop outs, cases of rejected loan applications, names of wilful loan defaulters together with cases of genuine defaulters not rehabilitated by banks, etc. were some of the dimensions which also needed to be monitored by wider publics.

It does not have to be mentioned, how much pressure for learning this information sharing will generate for the poor as well as the professionals/bureaucratic functionaries.

3. How to monitor access to common property resources (CPRS) as well as public goods? How to ensure that the poor excluded ones did not pay costs of free riding by the powerful ones?
4. Will markets act as monitors.

Those who believe in equilibrium economics assume that markets monitor better, who should get what and where depending upon the demand and supply. Is not it true that market forces often in coalition with bureaucratic forces and state power lead to a system whereby only certain types of needs of only only certain classes of rural society ^{in only certain regions} were responded to?

5. How to monitor that developmental intermediaries did not filter the resources meant for poor?

In a particular state, when several so-called Gandhian Voluntary Agencies were contacted to study the arrangements for providing employment to village artisans, it was discovered that almost all the agencies had become totally impervious to local leadership, did not pay minimum wages, contracted out the government work orders in many cases to defy the provisions of factory act for workers and obtained huge government subsidies for activities which generated enough value additions for paying their costs. This was not unique problem affecting only such institutions.

6. How to monitor 'the monitor'!

Very often the developmental interventions as well as the developmental programme managers become incapable of being monitored by the people (with small 'p'). It is very crucial that if poor were to become partners in developmental experiments, they must have incentives and capacity to monitor the interventionist. It has enormous learning advantage for both the sides. In addition to being a very important means of generating valid knowledge in a social setting, the process of mutual monitoring or what could be called as a surveillance mechanism also ensured genuine democratic culture. Unless and until leaders in a group were subjected to these mechanisms, it is quite likely that they would become

autocratic and insensitive to the interest of the poorer members. First step in this process was to demystify our own assumed expertise in the matter.

7. Monitoring Metaphors : means to measure the informal meanings.

In any group organised or unorganised; it is inevitable that after a few rounds of interaction on any problem of common interest, the group - dynamics will generate certain motifs, symbols, folklores, acronyms, popular jokes, etc., to codify collective experiences in a manner in which these remain available for reference generally only to the members of the groups. For instance the 'Touch and Vanish' was a popular joke about the T & V system and not entirely without any basis.

Metaphors are powerful medium of communication. By disregarding these we could throw away a great opportunity of learning.

Certain values, beliefs which can't be retained in the explicit form are codified into myths. Monitoring what is explicit, is like monitoring the content. Myth provides the context.

Metaphors are by definition incomplete and are not necessarily in the form of myths always. However, both myths and metaphors provided the meanings which formal language often failed to unravel.

8. Rointerpreting Traditional Myths : Rediscovering the Wheel

One of the important concept of information theory is that people tended to interpret new information in the context of their previous knowledge and the two elements, old and new, became fused in memory. Two examples could be given here about how through reinterpretation of traditional myths or stories, new meanings can be generated which provided a language for communication amongst the poor as well as poor and their benefactors.

1. In Eklavya's story, now should we interpret decision of Dronacharya of asking Eklavya to part with his thumb of right hand? What did it teach us traditionally? That subservience to Idols/Ideals of the ruling elite is bliss; Obedience was the best virtue, the tribals should not acquire skills which could threaten the dominant coalition of high caste (Brahmins and Rajputs). Wasn't this incident really the beginning of deskilling as a means of control?*
2. Likewise, another story of King Hiranya-kashyap having been killed by the faith of his deviant son Prahlad in the God was perhaps intended to generate a false hope in the mind of oppressed that blind faith in the systems'

* Taylorism, much later came to represent almost the same principle ("workers must give up the say of doing their work based on their own judgement and learn to obey the commands that are given in detail"). Also see audio-visuale developed by Amali Manterio, St. Xaviers Institute of Communication, Bombay.

ability to correct itself would bear fruit. These messages exist already in the mind of people. New messages, values and belief have to essentially contest these dominant stock of traditional moral values.

These are several other such fables which needed to be re-interpreted so that ^{contradictions} of current phase of Indian society could be analysed. New emergent meanings would substitute the meanings/context provided by the traditional myths. Monitoring these myths generates tremendous potential for learning about why people would behave the way they do.

Finally one of the most important element of this learning process needs to be added. Very often developmental analysts assume the role of catalytic agent. I think this is one of the most inappropriate definition of the role. As we all know a catalytic agent in a chemical reaction does not undergo any change in itself, do we then imply that the social activist can remain unaffected by the process of participation in developmental experiments or encounters?

Annexure

"Poverty alleviation programmes will have to be given the required degree of priority in investment and integrated with the relevant sectoral development programmes, especially those taken up in the rural areas. This will have to go hand in hand with providing economically viable programmes which are within the management capabilities of households and based on maximum recourse to local resources and skills. Programmes such as IRDP and NREP will have to be widened and their focus sharpened for taking the benefits to the target groups and households. Poverty alleviation programmes and rural development will be implemented simultaneously with agricultural and rural development programmes concerned with achieving a higher rate of agricultural growth in backward regions, increasing crop intensity of small and marginal holdings and enhancing productivity of dry-land areas, together with the supply of essential inputs like irrigation water (especially minor irrigation) fertilizers, HYV seeds, pesticides and agricultural and other extension services essential for improving income levels of small and marginal farmers.*"

While detailed discussion on the **tenor** of above quote from VII FYR, thinking on rural development might be out of place here, few questions however needed to be mentioned.

- a) How do we define the management capabilities of households? Will it not imply that resources be concentrated on those who already have these capabilities even amongst poor, where would such people be located, surely not randomly?
- b) Will conspicuous reliance on IADP type approach of agricultural growth (implying input intensive method of production increase) help dry holdings where stabilization and not increase of production was the priority problem?
- c) The fact that the preamble did not acknowledge the crucial anchors of poor households in semi-arid ecologies such as live stock, craft activities etc. made it apparent how well the problem of poor were defined.
- d) After reading the whole document from which above excerpts have been quoted, one got 'good' feeling about what ought to be done but would all of it be done at all was left to be decided by others.

Should we not deduce that a policy statement without mention of precise monitoring instruments was intended more for rhetorical purposes than for real implementation?

* Quoted from 'Approach to Seventh Plan - Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation' included in Agenda notes for 'conference of Ministers in-charge of Rural Development', September 4-5, 1984, Ministry of Rural Development, New Delhi. I may confess my unauthorized access to these notes-the public documents in any case. Officially I could not receive the report of sub-group on rural development because the same, reportedly, had not been yet finalised by the Ministry.

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