

# Towards a Theory of Rural Development

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By John R. Herzog

The two studies published together in the 1977 volume of *Development Dialogue* under the title «Towards a Theory of Rural Development» explore boldly and thoughtfully the possibilities in Third World countries for initiating and sustaining a process of mass-based rural development (1). The four authors, Wahidul Haque, Niranjan Mehta, Anisur Rahman and Ponna Wignaraja, all Asians, carefully develop the thesis that to liberate the rural masses, release their creative potential and thus make possible true development, the economic bases, institutions and attitudes of the rural poor must be progressively strengthened through carefully coordinated collective action.

Arguing that the kinds of development strategies pursued heretofore in Asian countries have not succeeded — and cannot succeed — in generating broadly-based rural development, the authors of «Towards a Theory of Rural Development» maintain that a real process of rural development can be initiated and sustained only by releasing the potential of Asia's greatest resource, the productive abilities of its peoples.

To accomplish that, the existing constraints on the activities of the rural poor must be overcome, and the authors argue that that requires the mobilization of the rural poor. Indeed the authors make mobilization the keystone of their Rural Development Strategy and deal perceptively with diverse aspects of rural mobilization in case studies of actual experiences and in analyses of specific issues.

The case studies presented in «Towards a Theory of Rural Development» include broad reviews of the rural development experiences of four countries (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and China) and intensive investigations of current conditions and recent changes in three small rural areas (in India, Bangladesh, and Thailand).

Both sets of case studies are of unusual interest, partly because they relate the specific problems that emerge in particular situations to more general tendencies and phenomena, partly because they trace specific interrelationships among the socio-political, economic, and ideological aspects of rural development. Also helpful are illustrations of the nature and origins of barriers to rural development and of the grave difficulties that even knowledgeable and well-intentioned leaders encounter. Quite possibly the case studies will be of especial interest to readers not well acquainted with the experiences of Asian countries in rural development.

«Towards a Theory of Rural Development» deals explicitly with a number of major issues immediately relevant to efforts aimed at mobilizing the rural poor: for example, what should be the criteria

for selecting target groups ? What should be the role of cadres ? How ambitious should mobilization efforts be ? How much emphasis should be placed on developing the political consciousness of the rural poor ? The seriousness of « operational » problems in implementing mobilization schemes is not overlooked, and consideration is given to such problems as how to persuade different segments of the rural poor to unite so as to defend their collective interests ; how to prevent rural elites from gaining control over new « cooperative » institutions ; how to establish a balance among economic, socio-political, and ideological actions in mobilization projects ; and how to avoid loss of momentum, especially in the case of withdrawal of outside support.

Though at times the authors' style is rather ponderous, on the whole the issues raised are important and relevant, the arguments coherent and sensible, and the analyses cogent and useful in clarifying basic options. For these reasons « Towards a Theory of Rural Development » is apt to be of considerable use to many readers in developing their own analyses and proposals. Moreover, readers who are especially interested in Africa may find of particular interest discussions in « Towards a Theory of Rural Development » of problems which seem likely to become increasingly acute in many parts of Africa. Among such problems would seem to be growing disparities within and between rural communities, especially in relation to differential access to credit, fertilizer, and the like ; the emergence of a class of landless agricultural labourers ; changes in land tenure and use benefiting the rich ; and increasing reliance on goods and services obtained from outside the community.

The authors of « Towards a Theory of Rural Development » might well be satisfied with the thought-provoking analyses of past experiences and specific problems that they provide. But even as the titles hint, the authors' objectives extend to constructing a theory of rural development and to deducing from that theory a strategy of rural development and criteria for use in the design and evaluation of rural development projects.

With this in mind the authors set out their development objectives ; describe with care the principal features, or at least symptoms, of the present situation ; and suggest a number of guidelines, tactics, actions and so forth. But they do not — and, in fact, they cannot — show that under the conditions currently prevailing in most Third World countries, adopting their proposals would quite probably lead to the mobilization of the rural masses and to the commencement of a process of genuine rural development.

At times the authors seem well aware of this problem. Not only are certain sections of their text heavily laced with qualifications but the introduction to the formal presentation of their « Rural Development Strategy » notes that :

the principles outlined in the following three chapters would be of immediate operational interest to societies where a mass-rooted leadership has actually come into power... (p. 48).

This key qualification, abandoned in subsequent discussions of the design and evaluation of rural development projects, may reflect the finding that of the four countries studied only China seems to have succeeded in mobilizing the rural poor. In effect, from an historical vantage point the authors identify a socio-political precondition to the « operational » relevance of their strategy and design criteria, and at that point they claim modestly that in situations where a mass-rooted leadership has *not* come into power, the « Rural Development Strategy » they propose may simply help such a leadership « to form its own vision of the future and accordingly chart its own course of action » (p. 48).

Were the authors to maintain steadily that their Rural Development Strategy is of « immediate operational interest » only for societies with mass-rooted leadership, it would be difficult — and perhaps unnecessary — to criticize their proposals. But in fact the authors quietly abandon their admission that insofar as societies without mass-rooted leadership are concerned they are only contributing to a « vision of the future » and treat as operational their strategy for creating an « ascending spiral of positive interaction between the superstructure and base to generate a process of rural development » (p. 121) :

The strategy of generating the ascending spiral that we see in operational terms... is the following :

1. Separate out the exploited as the target group.
2. Work in the superstructure to activate the cooperative values among the target group.
3. Initiate a cooperative activity by voluntary consensus among the target group or a subset of this group...
4. As the cooperative base makes progress, work in the superstructure to strengthen faith in cooperative effort, to systematize experience.. and to advance further the cooperative economic base « quantitatively and qualitatively » (p. 122-3).

At first sight the authors' strategy, replete with level-headed recommendations, lucid arguments, and appeals to such fashionable notions as basic needs, self-reliance, and indigenous technology, is apt to seem quite attractive (2). But whether in a society in which a mass-based leadership is not in power such a strategy will actually bring on mobilization of the rural poor and continuing rural development cannot be established directly, i.e., by trying to evaluate abstractly the specific proposals put forward. A critique or defense of the strategy must be based either on review of actual experiences in the use of the strategy or on analysis of the theory from which the strategy is, implicitly or explicitly, derived.

The macro and micro case studies of actual experiences contained in « Towards a Theory of Rural Development » do not reveal whether the authors' strategy would be effective. Evidence as to the possible efficacy of the strategy where a mass-rooted leadership is not in power would have to be derived from systematic efforts to apply the strategy under such conditions, but even such evidence would have to be interpreted very cautiously (3).

But while the reviews of actual experiences do not support even tentative inferences as to the adequacy of the proposed rural development strategy, it is possible to argue that the theory of rural development upon which the authors' rural development strategy is based is not satisfactory.

In a sense the source of the inadequacy of the theory underlying the authors' strategy is that it operates almost exclusively at the level of appearances, that is, at the level of observable events and conditions and of their apparent, immediate determinants.

To be sure there is nothing wrong with studying intensively the immediate causes of particular events or sequences, and in many situations — as in analysing the causes of growing intra-village disparities — such an approach may be invaluable. However, in most cases the specific phenomena actually observed as well as their apparent causes and consequences are but a part of larger, more complex, less evident and dynamic processes and systems: when they are seen in isolation and from very near by, such phenomena ordinarily cannot be sufficiently well understood to justify drawing conclusions regarding causal relationships and policy needs.

Because they do not look beyond or through immediately evident phenomena to consider the foundations, « laws », and tendencies of the prevailing « system », the authors of « Towards a Theory of Rural Development » leave themselves without a broad perspective on or penetrating analysis of prospective developments in rural areas and are constantly tempted to explain what has happened and what is likely to happen in terms of proximate, apparent causes and to seek solutions at the same level. Unfortunately the efficacy of solutions based on shallow analyses tends to be quite uncertain.

To show how the authors' shallow theoretical perspective has undercut their efforts at analysis and biased the strategy they propose, three of the principle elements of their theory are examined critically below. As is argued there, each of those elements — they concern the nature and function of rural classes, the forms and causes of rural exploitation, and the process of growth in output — is crucial to the authors' (partly implicit) theory of rural development and to the strategy they deduce from it.

1. It is to the authors' credit that they specifically recognize the existence of classes in rural areas, the possibility of changes in class structure, and the ubiquity — and complexity — of class conflict in rural areas. On the other hand the authors often fail to view classes as the products and agents of historical change and as integrally linked to the fundamental economic structures, institutions and ideologies of a society.

That leads the authors to suppose that while a rural social class is apt to float about in historical space, the victim or beneficiary of the breezes of change, it can, by becoming conscious of its own possibilities, learn to set and steer a steady course towards its own chosen destiny.

Such confidence in the capacity of a class to shape its own future helps to explain the conviction with which the authors of « Towards a Theory of Rural Development » argue that the rural poor should

unite and struggle to liberate themselves from the oppression of the rural rich. Such confidence may stimulate efforts to put an end to oppression, but if unjustified, it may engender policies and projects which fail miserably, ultimately weakening rather than strengthening the moral and economic bases of the rural poor.

The authors' confidence in the ability of the rural poor to navigate in historical space — i.e., to unite and to overturn the oppressive system through which they are exploited — seems to be based primarily on two assumptions, neither of which appears to be well founded :

(a) The first assumption is that the primary barrier to the mobilization of the rural poor is the prevalence of inappropriate attitudes. In presenting their strategy, the authors call for working in the superstructure before initiating cooperative activity, and they state « The project, then, starts in the superstructure » (p. 122) (4). Their assessment of the situation in the village of « Sultanpur » is unambiguous :

The objective barriers are formidable but not insuperable if scaled in stages. The major hurdles are subjective — though they originate because of past and present objective conditions (p. 82).

Indeed the authors maintain that in rural areas in general « the poor... have tended to become non-innovative, non-problem-solving and non-experimental » (p. 114). While the authors attribute that to the economic dependency of the poor on the rich, they claim that bringing about changes in such attitudes is critical to initiating rural development. Many analysts would argue to the contrary that the behaviour of the rural poor is in fact inovative and adaptive and that the crucial barrier to rural development lies not in the attitudes of rural populations but in the socio-economic structures and conditions to which their behaviour is of necessity adapted.

Over the past decade many economists have come to believe that the economic behaviour of rural populations does reflect objective conditions as expressed in « relative prices », « rates of return », and the like. In a roughly analogous manner students of socio-political behaviour may come to the conclusion that the attitudes of the rural poor are not the primary barrier to mobilization. If the rural poor have not joined together to overthrow their oppressors, perhaps that is because they have sound reasons for believing that under actual conditions they cannot succeed.

That is not to suggest that the rural poor are entirely helpless before objective conditions which they cannot influence or that there is no interaction between the ideological and material bases of a society. But the authors' readiness to attribute primacy to ideological factors is no more satisfactory than forms of historical materialism which disregard them altogether.

(b) The second assumption underlying the authors' faith in the capacity of the rural poor to determine their own future concerns the « objective » power of the rural poor. The authors suppose in effect that in rural areas the relative objective strengths of the rich and the poor are, so-to-speak, visible to the naked eye. Since it is evident that the rural poor are numerous, that their labour — or its fruit — is

essential to the rural rich, and that nowadays brutal forms of repression are unacceptable, the rural poor are in a position, according to the authors, to resist and ultimately end their oppression by the rural rich.

What the authors overlook is that rural populations, rich and poor alike, are deeply integrated into larger economic and socio-political systems. In many cases the rural rich are in large measure agents for extra-village elites, domestic and foreign, who benefit indirectly from the exploitation of the rural poor.

Extra-village elites will not invariably support the rural rich — who may on occasion be seen as parasitic rivals. Moreover, the extent to which they will back the rural rich and the ways in which they will do so may not be clear in the absence of an overt conflict, as elites, both rural and other, may not display all their forces until they are forced to abandon the pretense of a system based on mutual consent. Accordingly it is difficult to evaluate prospects for successfully combatting the rural rich and improving the material situation of the rural poor, especially as the interrelationships between the village and the national (and international) economy are apt to bear heavily, though possibly indirectly, on the outcome of a struggle between the rural rich and the rural poor.

2. The authors of «Towards a Theory of Rural Development» seem to use the term «exploitation» mainly to express the view that the terms under which the rural rich (and merchants in adjacent towns) exchange goods and services with the rural poor are generally highly unfavourable to the latter (5). In effect, in keeping with their emphasis on observable phenomena, the authors focus on seemingly evident forms of «exploitation» and concentrate their efforts on identifying the agents (land-owners, money-lenders, merchants) and on describing the instruments (usury, sharecropping, graft) on such exploitation.

That leads the authors to ignore indirect or concealed forms of exploitation and the possible beneficiaries thereof, notably urban elites and rich countries; to hold the rural rich largely responsible for the exploitation (and misery) of the rural poor; and to recommend that the rural poor unite in a struggle against the rural rich and undertake to dismantle progressively the instruments and mechanisms by means of which they are oppressed and exploited.

Possibly the rural poor can in some cases successfully combat the oppression of the rural rich and check certain blatant forms of exploitation — e.g. usury. But whether that would mean an end to the exploitation of the rural poor is quite another question: the conspicuous forms of exploitation which attract the attention of the authors are neither the only nor most effective means for exploiting the rural poor.

Indeed the focus in «Towards a Theory of Rural Development» on direct, conspicuous forms of exploitation (which fits better with the authors stress on unity and cooperative values than with their Marxist vocabulary, references to «dependency» and claims to having an historical perspective) invites neglect of such mechanisms for draining the rural economy as monopolistic «cooperative» marketing boards;

various kinds of taxes and subsidies; flows of adult workers from rural to urban areas; and expropriation of land (6). More than a century ago Marx suggested that under capitalism exploitation is concealed, and one may ask whether pursuit of the strategy proposed in « *Towards a Theory of Rural Development* » might ultimately lead more to the development of new, more subtle modes and mechanisms of exploitation than to a significant reduction in the intensity of the exploitation of the rural poor.

3. That the authors of « *Towards a Theory of Rural Development* » place less emphasis on the material bases and objectives of development that is usually the case is not disturbing and surely the importance of raising material levels of living does not justify any policy expected to stimulate production. Still in view of the necessity of improving the living conditions of the poor it is important to consider how increases in output can be obtained.

To the extent that the authors deal with that question, they tend to maintain that by liberating the creative potential of the population, mobilization will lead the way to « economic » development. Apparently they count heavily on collective action, especially for the construction of infrastructure and new institutions, and on the development and utilization of appropriate, indigenous technology.

Without denying the importance of liberating the potential of the population and of developing cooperative activities, one can ask whether that constitutes an adequate « strategy » for the economic development of rural areas. Indeed the authors hardly raise many issues which seem fundamental. For instance, is it necessary to change the market orientation of agriculture or can « market signals » be relied upon to induce responses conducive to development? Is it necessary to promote the complementarity of agriculture and industry, rural areas and urban areas, or can rural areas develop fairly autonomously? Is it desirable to eliminate quickly and completely the rural rich or should a more « pragmatic » approach be adopted (similar to that taken by the mass-rooted leadership in China)?

It often seems that the authors' emphasis on the liberation of the rural poor stems from the implicit presumption that once direct exploitation has come to an end, « economic growth » will proceed more-or-less spontaneously in the manner envisaged by neoclassical economics: savings and investment will expand, improved techniques will be developed and adopted and scarce resources will be used more efficiently...

But such a presumption may fail to take account fully of the « legacy » of the past. The authors' timid proposals for « delinking » the rural economy from the larger economy in which it is inserted may point in the right direction but do not seem sufficient to cope with the problems that are apt to be encountered at three levels:

(a) At the level of the rural area itself the methods of land use, the food habits, the infrastructure, the quality of « human », land, and other resources, and the tools, techniques, and technical know-how inherited from the past are not readily modified, not only because they are interdependent but also because they are tied to the area's relationships with the outside world.

The authors of «Towards a Theory of Rural Development» do not doubt the difficulty of transforming the economic structures and system of a rural area but they seem to believe that the sort of rural mobilization they envisage will be sufficiently dynamic and forceful to overcome such difficulties and to initiate and sustain a process of economic growth, even in situations in which mass-rooted leadership is not in power.

(b) Constraints on rural development are likely to be imposed too by national economic structures, as the incentives and pressures emanating from the national economic institutions and mechanisms associated with «underdevelopment», «dependency», and «peripheral capitalism» are frequently such as to discourage true rural development.

For instance, because of intense pressure to acquire cash, rural populations are often tightly bound to mechanisms (e.g., seasonal migration) which provide cash earnings, and they tend to be highly responsive to cash incentives, even to the point of not giving priority to covering their own needs in staple foods. And problems of food scarcity may be aggravated by political pressure to hold down the price of staple foods in urban areas, low prices reducing incentives to try to produce more.

Weakness of linkages between agriculture and industry may also pose problems. Typically «industrial» activity is oriented towards the production of (luxury) consumer goods and export markets and not towards the production of the inputs needed to increase production and productivity in agriculture.

(c) To the extent that under the current international economic order a rural population is paid poorly for what it «sells» but pays dearly for what it «buys», not only are levels of living held down but possibilities for saving and incentives to invest are severely restricted.

In the last analysis the authors of «Towards a Theory of Rural Development» expect mobilization of the rural poor to initiate and sustain economic growth because they do not consider that the fundamental causes of «underdevelopment» might be built into the foundations of the actual socio-economic structures but confine their attention to apparent, seemingly direct constraints on expansion — e.g., lack of innovative spirit, insufficient investment, inappropriate technology, inefficient use of land. Such constraints can, they believe, be overcome relatively easily once rural mobilization releases the forces of economic expansion that exploitation and oppression have long suppressed.

If the reservations expressed above as to the adequacy of three of the principal elements of the authors' theoretical structure are even partly justified, pursuit of the authors' strategy may not lead to the sort of rural development they envisage. Ultimately the shallowness of the authors' conceptual framework imposes a constraint on their analysis that no amount of empirical research, good will, or careful reasoning can overcome.

Handicapped by a narrow perspective and superficial analysis, the authors of «Towards a Theory of Rural Development» are vulnerable



to mistaking adaptive changes in the prevailing system for transformation of the basic socio-political and economic structures of contemporary rural areas.

Despite the authors' claim to offer radical solutions, their proposals do not seem to indicate how rural populations can escape from their distinctly subordinate roles in national and international economic structures and begin to influence the economic system which bears so strongly on their situation ; indeed the authors' proposals seem to point more in the direction of eliminating certain remnants of pre-capitalist and proto-capitalist structures in rural areas and of increasing the stability and efficiency of rural economic structures within the framework of peripheral capitalism. One must fear that the analysis, strategy, and tactics suggested by the authors of « *Towards a Theory of Rural Development* » do not measure up to their ambitious and commendable objective of pointing the way to rural development.

## FOOTNOTES

- (1) The first of the two studies, which in *Development Dialogue* is entitled « The Perspective », originally appeared in 1975 under the title « *Towards a Theory of Rural Development* ». The second study, completed in 1977, appears in *Development Dialogue* under its original title, « *Micro-level Development : Design and Evaluation of Rural Development Projects* ».
- (2) A distinction between the authors' « *Rural Development Strategy* » and their « *ascending spiral* » strategy does not seem crucial to the argument here. Similarly, discussion here of exactly what constitutes « *mobilization* » seems unnecessary.
- (3) The last sentence of « *Towards a Theory of Rural Development* » proposes « *field tests* » of the proposed strategy (p. 133).
- (4) The authors view « *working in the superstructure* » rather narrowly, placing the emphasis on building unity and cooperative values rather than on spreading a comprehensive ideology.
- (5) The authors do provide a broad definition of exploitation : « *appropriation of a part of the product of another's labour by exercising social, political, or economic bargaining power rather than sharing the product by agreement as to what constitutes a fair share in the product for each* » (p. 114). However, the « *fair share* » criterion is at best rather nebulous, and the authors do not refer back to their own definition when considering specific instances of exploitation.
- (6) The authors tend to interpret « *dependency* » very literally. Thus they refer to the dependency of landless agricultural workers on land-owners (p. 114) but ignore the role of « *dependency* » in perpetuating « *underdevelopment* ».