

BOOK REVIEWS

Rural Development Planning: Design and Method by S. N. Mishra, New Delhi, Satvahan Publications, 1984, ix+265 pp.

Rural Development: Putting the Last First by Robert Chambers, London, Longman, 1983, ix+246 pp.

I

The two books under review here concern themselves with the living conditions of the rural poor in the Third World and how they may be improved. Both have independently contributed important insights into the vexing problems of rural development. In my view, the two books mutually support each others weaknesses. Combined they achieve what neither would do alone, although the objectives and style of their writing is quite different. Each of them tries to shed light on the measures needed for the upliftment of the rural poor in Asia and Africa but from entirely opposite directions. I therefore recommend the reader to look at both books simultaneously to reap the most benefit.

Mishra's book has two purposes: to serve as a textbook for those who are engaged in rural development planning and to provide guidelines for actual planning at lower levels, closer to the rural poor. In India the lowest level of planning is done at the Block Development Office which covers the area of Panchayat Union. The design and method of planning discussed in this book is more specifically meant for officials at the block level. At the outset, emphasis is placed upon the consistency—the objectives of the lowest level plan should, in principle, mirror those of the national plan. Consistency does not, however, imply conformity; due flexibility should be allowed at the block level planning.

This prerequisite is one major characteristic of rural development planning in Mishra's book, and one that Chambers does not touch upon. Fortunately, in the Indian context, the national planning objectives of all five-year plans to date more or less overlap with the major goals of development planning for the rural poor, even though idealistically inflated goals may be just a reflection of the harsh realities, from Chambers' viewpoint. Those goals include:

- (1) Increase in income at a rate which at least ensures a rise in per capita income;
- (2) Reduction of income inequality among different classes and regions;
- (3) Reduction of inequality in private ownership of the means of production, including land, so as to prevent concentration of wealth and assets in fewer and fewer hands;
- (4) Eradication of poverty;
- (5) Increase in employment; and
- (6) Fulfilment of the basic minimum needs.

The chief concern of both authors is the eradication of poverty in the rural areas. But the concept of poverty itself is different for each author. Mishra begins with the per capita per day calorie requirement, converts this into an equivalent monthly package of food equivalent, and then converts the package into the amount of money

needed to buy it at a given set of prices. Through this procedure, the degree of poverty in rural areas can be measured in terms of money, but the social dimensions of poverty will perhaps be dropped from the scope of planning. Chambers goes further, to categorize poverty into five areas of disadvantage (few assets, physical weakness, vulnerability, powerlessness, and isolation), which interlock like a web, trapping people into their deprivation. To include the dimension of social relations, like powerlessness, is a key issue, although many privileged outsiders might find such a perspective difficult to deal with.

In footnote 4 (pp. 71-72), Mishra's reaction to one eminent British sociologist is very interesting. R. P. Dore was "shocked" to see the shabby condition of a village school in rural India. Mishra comments that the author graduated from a similar school thirty-five years ago and implies that the condition of the school did not matter much. This reaction should perhaps have been more embodied in the main text of his book.

II

The most commendable feature of Mishra's work is the explicit determination he conveys to eradicate rural poverty and his efforts to find ways to improve the economic life of the poorest section of the rural population through the description of planning techniques. This angle is seldom found in literature of this kind. For instance, Mishra argues that the economic justification of any development project is made in terms of social cost and benefit, where a higher social value is attached to the economic activities of the rural poor to the extent that the accrual of benefits of the rich is viewed almost as a social offense. Such non-market factors as family labor and home-consumption are also taken into account, though after being converted into monetary terms. In this respect, this approach also differs from that of conventional textbooks discussing justification of a project in the context of a highly sophisticated market economy. Few projects in the Third World could be subjected to balance sheet and trading account analysis. In Mishra's book some important methods of economic evaluation, such as cost-benefit analysis or internal rates of return are elaborately explained step by step in simple language, which enables people working at block level to use them without much knowledge of economics.

The design and method for rural development planning does not just end up with a normative description of planning procedures at local levels. A case study conducted at the Zamaria block in Uttar Pradesh State has been included in the last chapter of the book to provide a pilot scheme. In designing the Zamaria block development plan the principles and techniques of the book have been applied to offer a model. Unfortunately, the example demonstrated in the Zamaria block plan does not follow the detailed assertions outlined in Chapters 3 and 4. This is attributed to a lack of necessary data. The Zamaria block has to wait for the appropriate organizational setup to undertake such preparatory tasks, according to the theory propounded in this book. At the same time, the case study demonstrates how a plan can be prepared when data is scarce. It is to be hoped that similar information bottlenecks will not prevent the method of planning elaborated here from being utilized for rural development projects in many parts of Asia and Africa.

III

The rural poor generally comprise landless agricultural laborers and artisans, and marginal and small-scale cultivators with no side-business. Since the rural households below the poverty line account for 40 to 60 per cent of total rural households in most regions of South Asia,^a the planners are faced with the task of selecting a feasible number of households as a target for the plan. A solution to this problem, suggests Mishra, is to select first the poorest households in every village to come up with an appropriate target number for a project. This can be done at a village assembly at the inception of a rural development project. This kind of solution reminds us of the subtitle of Chambers' book, "Putting the Last First," and reflects the main theme of the book.

For the increased welfare of the rural poor, popular participation in development is essential for the villagers themselves. The *panchayat raj* institutions were created in India in the early 1960s to enable people's representatives at the village level to participate in rural development. The *panchayat raj*, based on the noble ideas of the Mahatma Gandhi, has resulted in frustration and disappointment after twenty-five years of operation. On the ashes of the *panchayat raj* a considerably large number of voluntary organizations have been emerging since the mid-1970s and motivating the rural poor. More attention should be paid to the role of people's movements in rural development.^b

While Mishra's book mainly addresses local development officials of governmental or semi-governmental agencies, Chambers' book appeals more to outsiders, people concerned with rural development who are themselves neither rural nor poor, including foreign researchers and consultants. He challenges the conventional way of dealing with rural poverty adopted by the cultures of negative academics and positive practitioners. Both are cultures of urban-based outsiders with inherent top-down, core-periphery, center-outward biases of knowledge. As an alternative he proposes new approaches to understanding, from the bottom up, from the periphery toward the core, from the remote toward the central. The culture of the rural poor themselves must be the real center of attention and study.

In this context, putting the last first implies a reversal of methods of learning. This learning reversal, according to Chambers, can cover many aspects of life and can take many forms. It would, however, include at least the following basic principles: sitting, asking, and listening; learning from the poorest; learning indigenous technical knowledge, joint R & D; learning by working; and simulation games.

Once we begin to learn from the rural poor, even the concept of poverty itself is shaken. The life cycle of rural households is very dependent upon the degree of poverty in an agricultural community. According to the number, gender, and age of children, the conditions of a subsistence economy of a rural population fluctuate far beyond the planning horizon of the kind of rural development envisaged. In one South Asian village revisited after thirteen years, I noticed that some of the poorest households had improved their living standards not because of rural development planning but because of the change in income earning capability; their children and

^a A. R. Khan, and E. Lee, *Poverty in Rural Asia* (Bangkok: ILO/ARTEP, 1984).

^b H. Sethi, and S. Kothari, *The Non-party Political Process: Uncertain Alternatives* (New Delhi: UNRISD/Lakayan, 1983).

wives started working in the fields. On the contrary, some well-to-do cultivators suffered a decline in their economic welfare not because of the failure of the rural development project but because a part of their landed property had been given away to their children when they married.^c Thus, even the simplest method exercised by the development planners in the selection of the poorest section does not seem to be the easy task that it appears to be in Mishra's book.

Chambers' passionate indignation vis-à-vis rural poverty in the Third World is reflected in his phrase "bureaucracy of the parasital." He admires the courage of the rural poor and those who work with and for them in face of abuse, discrimination, and danger. But Chambers realizes his own limitations. Being a confused and uneasy middle-class Englishman, he does not believe that foreign outsiders like himself can be justified in urging others to risk their livelihoods or lives. This point is very important in the midst of agrarian crisis where some self-complacent foreign revolutionaries tend to ignore this ethical question and encourage vulnerable poor people to take risks.

Although the tone of Mishra's argument is cool and remarkably objective, his determination to eradicate rural poverty is equally sympathetic to the weaker sections in remote regions. His life is much closer to the reality of the rural poor than that of Chambers. It is paradoxical that the narrow social distance between the author and the rural poor should make the explanation in his book very comprehensive and well balanced. With the help of Chambers' book, many reader will be able to understand Mishra's compassion for the rural poor expressed between the lines.

(Hisashi Nakamura)

^c H. Nakamura, "Disintegration and Re-integration of a Rural Society in the Process of Economic Development," in *Socio-Cultural Change in Villages in Tiruchirapalli District, Tamilnadu, India, Part 2, Modern Period No. 1* (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1983).

African Regional Organizations, edited by Domenico Mazzeo, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, ix+265 pp.

I

A large number of regional cooperation organizations in the form of tariff unions, free trade associations, common markets, etc. have been established in Third World regions, including Africa, and this is because the countries of such regions view regional cooperation as an important means of accomplishing economic development or economic self-reliance as well as a forum in the international economic system in which they can have a stronger say. In view of the fact that in recent years such countries have put collective self-reliance forward as the mainstay of development strategy, they can be expected to continue to firmly retain an orientation toward what might be called "developmental regionalism."

In spite of such orientation and the expectations to which it gives rise, however, in many cases the reality of regional cooperation falls short of satisfactory attainment