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Sociologists in a Development Agency

Observations from the World Bank

Let me begin by saying how pleased I am to attend this workshop initiated by GTZ. This kind of encounter among social scientists from development agencies is long overdue. I hope that it won't remain a lonely swallow. I do hope it will lead to similar periodic reunions.

Rather than discussing esoteric questions about what sociology can or cannot do about inducing development, I would like to share with you some of my own experiences as a sociologist at the World Bank, where I have been working for sixteen years. During that time I have watched the institution's view of sociologists change. It changed from seeing them as the Bank's own luxury species, valued for its rarity but not really relevant to the daily struggle in the project trenches, to treating them as rather respected and desirable (although sometimes troublesome!) professionals.

Two premises underscore my comments today. First I believe that the anthropologist or sociologist comes with her or him a distinct professional knowledge about social organization, social structure, and social and cultural change that is sorely needed for sustainable development. The second premise is that development agencies urgently need to institutionalize sociological and anthropological expertise within their everyday organizational structures and work patterns.

Development is not about commodities, it is not even about new technologies. It is about people and institutions. Because of that, I think social scientists must be present in the core teams that prepare and design development policies and programs, and that actually manage/supervise the execution of development projects. Confidence derived from our distinctive contribution to the business of development should help us do not just the forensic ex-post evaluation of projects, or ancillary and often ignored research projects. Confidence in our distinct knowledge prompts us to enter into induced development's basic philosophy, goals, and procedures.

Sociologists must be intellectually more creative, competitive and militant. They should be able to criticize the econocratic or technocratic models that still govern development interventions in many agencies. By econocratic models I mean interventions that focus one-sidedly on influencing the economic variables, regarding...
them as the only decisive ones and assuming that the “rest” will necessarily “fall in place”. By technocratic models I refer to projects that address the technological variables more or less “in vitro”, dis-embedded and dis-embodied from their societal context. The sociological/anthropological perspective rejects such distorted models - or corrects them. It can reestablish the balance by illuminating the social fabric within which such variables are intimately embedded

Work Patterns, Skills and Roles

One interesting disciplinary issue is, as I see it, whether the patterns of applied social science work that have crystallized in the World Bank are replicable in other development agencies - and with what adjustments. Social scientists have been working in various development agencies for several decades. Often though, many have to give up their specific identity and comparative advantages as sociologists or anthropologists as they assume positions (such as loan officer, librarian, editor, speech writer etc.) which do not call primarily for the exercise of their trained expertise. This issue was raised correctly and forcefully in Dr. Kievelitz’s paper.

What has characterized sociology in the World Bank has been the ability of most social scientists to work as social scientists throughout the institution and to be recognized as such.

The role of in-house social scientists within development and donor agencies, both the bilateral and the international ones, is a very consequential matter. I make this statement being fully aware of the vast financial resources transferred, and of the policy, technical and institutional influence exercised, through these agencies. As insiders, we often observe that the cultural rhetoric of such agencies has been growing faster than their competence at acting on cultural issues. By and large, the staff/skills mix of such agencies is heavily skewed towards economists - much heavier than objectively required by the kind of development work these agencies perform. Sometimes I find it simply embarrassing to reveal the disproportion in numbers among some staff categories. The absence of competent applied sociologists and anthropologists in many in-house intellectual and policy debates is detrimental to the products and performance of these agencies. Moreover, as these international agencies influence the work patterns of government agencies and the planning of public investments in developing countries, the risk is high that the same inadequate skill mix will be reproduced there, legitimizing and reinforcing rather than overcoming local econocratic or technocratic tendencies. This must be fought. And this is just one other key reason why institutionalizing the functional roles of social scientists in development agencies is so critical.


Uwe Kievelitz, Two Steps Forward, One Step Back? in this volume.
Let me discuss one example from our own meeting in connection with this argument. I think that the presentation made by Mr. Simson this morning, which was both sympathetic and critical of ethnologists in development, made nevertheless an unwarranted dichotomy within the professional staff of development agencies - a dichotomy between decision makers, on the one side, and their "cultural advisers" on the other. With some benevolence, he suggested in the very title of his paper that decision makers in development agencies are a group of leaders who have "demands" on "their cultural advisers." The latter, at best, should just be at the side of the former, ready to answer. The implication is obvious: decision makers necessarily and legitimately embody skills other than cultural ones. Even though they repeatedly "decide" all the time on crucial social and cultural matters, they should not necessarily have themselves, or have among themselves, cultural skills or sociological experts. I wonder on what grounds is this dichotomy and role allocation based? Why should the cultural specialists be seen only as "advisers" from the side-line? What professional skills are required or sufficient for membership in the superior caste of "decision makers"? It is not that sociologists covet administrators' positions: the issue is that decision making is entrusted to a set of skills that does not include the socio-cultural ones. Is there anything holy or self-sufficient about decision makers that make the cultural specialists - the sociologist or anthropologist - ineligible or superfluous for this responsibility? I do not share, of course, the philosophic argument that sees socio-cultural knowledge as optional "advice", rather than recognizing it as an indispensable part in the very essence of policy and decision-making.

However, let me also say that not only decision makers are guilty of introducing this strange division of labour. Quite often the sociologists and anthropologists themselves have done, a great deal to reinforce and perpetuate this dichotomy. I feel that even around this table we are still prisoners of some obsolete academic paradigms which hamper our work in development anthropology.

**Induced Development: by Fiat Lux or Social Actors?**

In my work in the World Bank, I have found at least two irreducible points that must constantly be kept in mind.

One is that the work pattern of development agencies results from the very nature of financially and exogenously induced development. This kind of development is pursued through planning and projects, whereas the historical pattern of human development has been spontaneous and endogenously generated. Financially induced development aims to accelerate the pace of economic growth and social change.

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1 Uwe Simson, Development Projects and Science, in this volume.
2 I have analyzed in more detail the concept of financially induced development in my World Bank Discussion Paper No. 114 entitled "Using Knowledge from Social Science in Development Projects" (Washington, DC, January 1991), see also Putting People First, 2nd edition, chapter 1, Oxford University Press 1991 (forthcoming).
But it also runs the risk of creating social imbalances, particularly when planned interventions are informed by inadequate models and knowledge.

The other point is that the central core around which the financial and technical resources must be organized and marshalled in projects are the social actors, the people.

No other disciplines have more professional knowledge to offer about the social actors than do sociology and anthropology. Putting People First in development is not just a slogan. It means starting with people and building project and programs around their needs and capacities to act. The social actors are the core and backbone of any development process. Recognizing the centrality of people in projects is not a matter of simple rhetoric. Neither is it a professional bias that we might indulge in as sociologists. It is the key issue of the development paradigm. Models for development programs that do not start from the social actor clash with the model intrinsic to the real historical process of development. The social fabric is not a “black box” as it is often dealt with in development projects. The “black box” argument is a comfortable concept for those not equipped professionally to know and explain social and cultural structures. We stand to gain much from rejecting the concept of “black box.” We must show that the “black box” of socio-cultural organization is dark only to the viewer whose eyes are closed, not because there is nothing to see.

We must also attack the biblical approach to development interventions, which I would call the “Fiat Lux” approach. While light may have appeared when God said Fiat Lux, “and there was light”, social changes never happen just because a project report decrees that they must happen. If, for example, a World Bank appraisal report just states, “the project should create a network of water users organizations”, despite the fact that nobody in the project area knows what a water users association is or how it can be created out of a disparate set of individuals, I can assure you that no water users organizations will emerge by “fiat.” The knowledge necessary to accomplish such socio-organizational tasks comes from applied social science and patient social work among the grassroots. The conversion of such knowledge into a step-by-small-step project strategy can be done best by applied sociologists. Carefully spelled out implementation strategies ought to be explicitly incorporated into projects replacing the arrogant “black box” mystery or the “Fiat Lux” decree.

GTZ, the World Bank and other development assistance agencies are knowledge type organizations, they fundamentally are in business of promoting, developing, and transmitting knowledge. Within such organizations we have to deal with two basic stocks of knowledge - constitutive stocks and regulative stocks, the regulative ones being those which are structuring the ways in which such organizations operate. We have to deal also with the continuous flows of new knowledge, which are very rich in development organizations. Anthropologists and sociologists can be
much more influential if we learn to understand the relationships between these types of knowledge and how to interpret and develop the regulative knowledge. There are inherent tensions and clashes between these stocks of knowledge and their exponents. If social scientists position themselves favorably in the knowledge flows and contribute to producing and codifying new knowledge, they can become much more influential within organizations.

Where Do Sociologists Come in?

The conventional entry points into development planning for sociologists and anthropologists have traditionally been very narrow, constraining, Procrustean like. We have learned in our daily work at the World Bank that the range of entry points for sociology clearly can and must be broadened. This is probably true for bilateral development agencies as well. But such broadening is not a gift that will be handed over to sociologists in a neatly tied package. Social scientists must themselves locate the key junctures within agencies (I think of both organizational and processual junctures) and use each juncture as an entry point for sociological expertise. At times we will have to repeat what has already been done, at other times we must carve a new sociological “product” that can fit one or another particular entry point.

If we manage to carve new and useful products, then social science will be increasingly in demand. I appreciate the point made by Professor Evers this morning on the issue of supply and demand for social science, but this sword carries two edges. A more active stand, I would say, can be even more effective. Social scientists should not just wait for demand to grow. While demand will increase as frustrated project officers seek new approaches and ideas, we could be doing a lot more than we are by expanding the supply and putting forward our analytical and social-constructive skills. A supply driven strategy can accelerate the use of social science in planned induced development.

One basic “guns versus butter” argument in most agencies is the cost of carrying out social science analysis. Sometimes we hear that it may be too expensive to do social analysis. This, simply, is not true! Social analysis obviously carries a cost, as does economic analysis or anything else. Yet the correct measurement of its value lies not in the price tag of the social study, but in the short and long term price to be paid for not carrying out adequate social planning. Here the evidence is unequivocal. In the Bank we carried out a study of 57 completed projects that matched quality of social analysis with achieved economic rates of return. About 30 (53 percent) of the projects conducted some form of social and cultural analysis, before or at appraisal stage; 27 (47 percent) either had no or minimal social analysis. Comparing rates of return, the projects with social analysis reached an 18.5 percent rate of return on the average, while the ERR of the latter group was less than 9 percent - an average that, I should point out, not only includes projects with no positive rate of return at

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3 Hans-Dieter Evers, Optimizing the Use of Social Science Know-How, in this volume.
all, but also one that implies that the borrower might have been better off leaving the money in the Bank and collecting the interest. I don't want to carry the argument too far, but that and other studies confirmed that social analysis pays off.

In my remaining time, I would like to develop my theme concerning the need for social scientists to internalize the social/cultural structures of their agency in carrying out their work. Within the World Bank, we operate on the basis of a “project cycle,” of which many of you around this table are aware. This is a sequential series of stages in the development of a project: project identification, preparation, appraisal, implementation/supervision, and project evaluation. We try to define in each phase of the cycle in which manner and with what type of analytical or methodological “products” we can contribute. I can assure you that this is a very effective approach. Our sociologists have tailored their work, tools, and time allocation to each stage, even though there are unforeseen difficulties over how to integrate sociological analysis and recommendations in every single case. The linearity implied by the concept of a project cycle is only apparent, however. The indispensable ex ante social charting of a project’s path must be complemented by ongoing sociological monitoring during implementation.

There are other entry points for sociological knowledge, in addition to the stages of a project. Let me give an example from my experience as one of the Bank’s advisers for agricultural projects between 1983-1987. Projects are prepared in the Bank’s regional divisions. Before they came to the loan committee that votes on whether to provide Bank financing for a proposed project, they were supposed to pass through the central agricultural department for review and sign-off by one of the lead project advisers. Each adviser was assigned a basket of projects, and through periodic reviews in each of the pre-implementation stages, he had to ensure policy consistency and project quality. As Sociology Adviser, my “basket” consisted of projects with major socio-cultural issues. The adviser’s signature, in addition to the clearance from the regional department, was essential for the project to proceed to the loan committee; sustained objections had to be resolved by the Bank’s senior management. That was a very powerful way to institutionalize, inter alia, sociological analysis and review, because there was a formal mechanism and an incentive for bringing socio-cultural requirements into the project’s formulation. Many projects were sociologically improved in this manner, but on more than a few occasions, objections on social grounds had to go all the way to Bank management. We won the

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8 For more details about the comparative analysis of these 57 projects, see: Conrad Kottak, When People Don’t Come First, in Michael M. Cernea (ed.) Putting People First: Sociological Variables in Rural Development, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 1991 (forthcoming).

9 Time and space do not allow the inclusion of supportive case descriptions, but those interested may find many such examples discussed in detail, project stage by project stage, in the volume “Putting People First: Sociological Variables in Rural Development” (see in particular the chapter on social forestry projects by Guggenheim and Spears, on rural roads projects by Cook, on livestock development projects by Dyson-Hudson, and others).
Another extremely important entry point is through project supervision. This is where you can see how plans become practice, how the project matches real life conditions or clashes with them, and how it is received by the population. It is not easy to modify a project in midstream, but it can be done. In my experience, what counts most during supervision is the ability of the project sociologist to gather and present facts, especially field facts. The approach I always recommend to consultant or staff sociologists is to load their field reports with facts, more than anything else. The bureaucracy will react more receptively when the sociologist knows his social facts and demonstrates what is really happening, rather than offering a general advocacy.

**Institutionalizing Requirements for Social Analysis**

It is important to institutionalize agency norms about the categories of social analysis that must be reflected in project documents. This makes social analysis mandatory in project preparation. In practice, we can hardly hope at this stage to have a Bank anthropologist for every single project. But the task manager for each project must ensure that a specific social analysis is made and certain key data are present. And if he cannot do it himself, he knows that there are social specialists available whose services he or she can use, primarily in the country where the project is.

Let me give you an example. The World Bank's internal guidelines for project processing (issued in 1971) required only technical, economic, and commercial appraisal for every project proposed for Bank financing. In the late 1970s and early 1980s we criticized these guidelines time and over again saying that they were not sufficient and that the Bank needed to institutionalize sociological appraisal as well. Finally, the internal guidelines were rewritten in 1983 and issued in January 1984, including a section explicitly on the appraisal of sociological aspects of projects. In it we incorporated the main elements that we believe should be in the focus of every sociological appraisal.

1. The social, cultural and demographic characteristics of the intended local beneficiary populations, including groups that may be adversely affected.
2. The social organization of productive activities of the project area population.
3. The cultural acceptability of the project and its compatibility with the needs of intended beneficiaries.

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10See World Bank Operational Manual Statement No. 20, Project Appraisal, 1984. These guidelines, mandatory for Bank staff, also influence the activities of planners in borrowing agencies in developing countries, of international consultants, etc.
4. the project’s social strategy, specifying how the project will be implemented at the local level, eliciting beneficiaries’ participation.

I recently saw a GTZ brochure describing “Applied Project Economics.” I hope you wouldn’t mind my saying that perhaps it is a good brochure in economic terms, but it contains hardly a trace of sociological analysis. A disciplined economist could rigorously follow all of this brochure’s guidelines and still ignore the social variables, through no fault of his own, he would produce a socially unfit project.

**Policies with Sociological Content**

Let me put forward another argument: the need to incorporate sociological knowledge in the agency’s overall development policies, not only in individual projects.

One of the obsolete academic paradigms to which I referred earlier, that hampers development-oriented anthropology, is the traditional belief that the social scientist’s role is to generate data and information but refrain from charting what action is to be taken. The social scientist is defined as producer of descriptive data, while the policy maker or administrator alone is the one to decide whether to use or ignore the information, and what the course of practical action should be. Let me give you a quote to this respect:

“A wise anthropologist will not try to tell an administrator what he ought to do; it is his special task to provide the scientifically collected and analyzed knowledge that the administrator can use if he likes.”

You may not recognize or underwrite yourself this statement. But it carries authority. It was written by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, one of our most respected forefathers in social anthropology. Authority notwithstanding, I think we should not guide ourselves according to that prescription. Such an abdication of responsibility is neither acceptable nor necessary. On the contrary, I think that we should not shy away from the responsibility of becoming part of the policy-making process rather than just supply data for it. Of course, this is far from easy. But policy writing should be recognized as crucial for development social science, because we have valuable contributions to make. And we have to make it with prudence, with responsibility and without arrogance, well aware of the limitations to our knowledge and analytical tools.

When social variables are reflected in policy guidelines, social concerns become part of the institution’s normative structure rather than just the agenda of some individuals. Every policy, as a regulative stock of knowledge, is a multiplier. The multiplier results triggered by policy formulation are far more effective than the

piecemeal feedback of happenstance lessons from past projects into new ones. Once the socio-cultural prerequisites are written in as policy components, those guided by that policy are mandated to consider the cultural variables, to look into people's social organization, and to bring in the professional skills needed to do the job competently.

But to achieve policy impacts, we must have a significant and persuasive message and be apt in articulating it. In the World Bank, we have done that on certain issues, although much is still to be done on many others.

Some examples would prove my point. For many years Bank projects were unable to take into account the distinctive cultural and social organization of tribal populations. This was harmful. Eventually, policy guidelines to protect tribal people were formulated for all Bank assisted projects affecting tribal groups. Many subsequent projects were modified due to these guidelines. While some projects still escape it, there are noticeable improvements. Recently, in 1990, a group of social scientists within the Bank have also begun to revise and update this policy, so that it not just protects but also actively assists indigenous people participate in equitable development. The content of the new guidelines benefits from much of the socio-anthropological research on the culture, organization and institutions of tribal groups. The dialectic between social science knowledge, practical experience, and policy guidelines shows how policy formulation must be approached as a set of evolving norms and not simply seen as diktats from above.

Translating research findings into policy prescriptions is the road to large scale impact. We must admit, however, that often development anthropologists are themselves not yet equipped with enough operational knowledge and experience from actual projects, and familiarity with agency culture and procedures, to be able to promote that translation. Simply leaving social science knowledge "on the shelf" for an administrator to use "if he likes" is not enough.

An interesting case of how to close the research/policy/practice circle is the development of the World Bank’s policy for projects that cause population displacement. Forced displacement is common in projects such as irrigation and power dams, highway or port construction, urban infrastructure, etc. The history of what happens to the people displaced from the reservoir area is usually a sad one.

Bank sociologists managed to write policy guidelines for such project-caused displacement in 1979-1980 and the Bank institutionalized these guidelines in a formal statement. This policy drew directly upon social science research that demonstrated how difficult it was for most displaced people to reestablish viable forms

12 World Bank Operational Manual Statement No 2 34, Tribal People in Bank Financed Development Projects, 1982
of production, society, and culture once they lost the land basis and socio-cultural
dimensions of their existence.

After several years, we undertook a policy review (in 1984/85) to assess the ef-
fectiveness of the new policy and the consistency of actual Bank projects with it.
(Systematic studies of the gap between the idea - the policy - and the actual - project
performance - are a promising area which social scientists should visit frequently.)
The study found that involuntary resettlement in agriculture and energy alone oc-
curred in some 40 projects located in 27 countries, and the sum of displacement
amounted to at least 750,000 people. Some of these projects were developed by
other donors that lacked resettlement guidelines and were later taken over by the
Bank. The study generated a number of important findings, such as:

- there was an engineering bias skewing projects away from resettlement, social
  problems and alternatives,
- relocations were poorly planned,
- displaced populations were systematically undercounted,
- planning to restore production was inadequate,
- resettlement components were chronically underfinanced,
- host populations slated to receive resettlers in their midst were neglected in the
  project’s vision;
- affected people were given no voice in planning resettlement.

The study recommended improvements in the Bank’s social, economic, technical
treatment of displacement, as well as a number of institutional measures to increase
the coherence and applicability of the Bank’s policy. All of the study’s policy, op-
erational, and staffing recommendations were accepted by the Bank’s management,
a new policy note was issued to supplement the prior guidelines, and the Bank’s
policy was made publicly known. As a result, a considerable number of additional
sociologists and anthropologists were employed throughout the Bank to help
intensify work along the recommended lines. Internal statistics reported increases
in the use of social scientists by both the Bank, and, even more importantly, many
of its borrowers. Ongoing evaluation studies are documenting the improvements
that are taking place. The difficulties of displacement are far from disappearing.

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14 Michael Cernea, Involuntary Resettlement in Development Projects: Policy Guidelines for
15 See Scott Guggenheim, Peasants, Planners, and Participation: Resettlement in Mexico, in
Michael, M. Cernea and Scott Guggenheim (eds.), Anthropological Approaches to Involuntary Resettle-
ment Theory, Policy, Practice Westview Press, 1991 (forthcoming)
but a much better strategy and more resources are being channelled towards sound solutions.16

I believe this example illustrates well how social science knowledge can and should be brought into development agencies, developing policies, monitoring their implementation, assisting directly in project design and implementation, assessing impact, and keeping alive the linkages with basic social science research.17

Similar sociological work has been carried out in the Bank in other sectors as well. The policy paper on the Bank’s assistance for primary education systems in developing countries, for instance, is grounded in a sociological analysis of social and cultural equity criteria, children’s family background and other social variables.18 Social scientists have been also among the principal authors of the Bank’s paper on “urban policy and economic development - an agenda for the 1990s”.

This job is not easy, and I do not want to leave the impression that sociology in the World Bank was a discovery just waiting to happen. We have gone part of the way, but the longer half is still ahead. To quote Rainer Maria Rilke,

“Do not believe that he who seeks to comfort you lives untroubled among the simple and quiet worlds that sometimes do you good. His life has much difficulty and sadness, and remains far behind yours. Were it otherwise he would never have been able to find those worlds.”19

Yet there is still much to do

I would like to conclude by saying that even as I speak about my own and my colleagues’ experiences, I find our work extraordinarily exciting. I think that all sociologists and anthropologists who work in development are in fact very fortunate, in a way perhaps more fortunate than their academic colleagues, because their work is immediately consequential. It affects people directly and we hope - and often see - it affects people for the better. If you do good work, the results can be enormously gratifying; you can stop many bad things from happening, and help good things come to pass.

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17It is interesting to note that the work on this policy continues: social scientists in the Bank, with suggestions from outside social scientists, have recently updated and strengthened again the directives regarding displacement in Bank projects; see World Bank Operational Directives No 4.30 Involuntary Resettlement, June 1990.


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