BEYOND BASIC LITERACY

A UNIVERSITY FOR THE RURAL POOR

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The educational goals proposed for rural peoples in developing countries do not usually extend beyond basic literacy and the technical skills. The Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences (FUNDAEC) near Cali, Colombia was established in 1974 as a rural university to go beyond these limited goals and to bring the benefits of higher learning and scientific and agricultural research to the rural poor of the surrounding Cauca Valley.

FUNDAEC was the brainchild of a group of university professors from the Universidad del Valle who became aware that development was not improving the lot of the majority of poor Colombians. In particular, the new agricultural technologies of the "green revolution" had permitted the large plantation owners to increase their yields, and thus profits, and to acquire the lands of many smallholders.

FARMERS BECAME LABOURERS

The large plantations were increasingly given over to the production of export crops such as cotton, soybeans, and especially sugarcane. The landless farmers were forced to become labourers on land that may originally have belonged to their families or to search for temporary work in nearby cities. Development has not only failed to improve the lot of the majority of small farmers in Cauca, it has actually worsened their situation.

The impetus for establishing FUNDAEC was disappointment with traditional rural education and awareness of the increasing poverty confronting the rural population. The rural university sought to do more than teach farmers to use technology brought in from outside; it tried to develop trained individuals who could both identify the problems of the community, and research strategies to address them. "Usually when one thinks of institutions working with peasants, they are not supposed to take a very high-powered approach intellectually," says FUNDAEC director Dr Farzam Arbab. "What is usually taken to the peasants is information, not knowledge. As far as I can tell, FUNDAEC is a rare kind of institution because we make the creation of knowledge the basic issue. A rural population needs a university, not just primary or technical schools, to act as its learning institution."

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The three levels of the FUNDAEC learning system are the "promoter" of rural well-being, the "technician," and the "engineer." The promoter level is the basic two years of high school education FUNDAEC hopes will become universal in the region. The technician level is achieved by continuing one's studies two years past the promoter level, to the equivalent of completion of high school. After an additional three years' study, the student attains the "engineer" level, equivalent to graduating from university.

Many people believe that education contributes to development by providing individuals with specific skills and knowledge, they assume that somehow the existence of such individuals will by itself bring about development. FUNDAEC, on the other hand, considers its main objective to be the search for development strategies for the region it serves. Training programs, the nature of which must necessarily change over time, are only components of the overall strategy.

The students work both as teachers of the farmers and as consultants with small-scale production ventures involving up to six farmers. This ties part of their salary to the profits of the associations, ensuring their commitment to them and giving them a source of income. In addition to this role, the engineers of rural well-being are engaged in agricultural research and in bringing literacy and the benefits of the research to the peasants, using materials developed by FUNDAEC.

FUNDAEC's professors feel the curriculum, especially the service to the community component, has engendered a strong sense of commitment among the new engineers for rural well-being. Not everyone has been so optimistic. "Many people made bets with me that none of them would be there after the first couple of years," recounts Dr Arbab. "It's turned out to be totally the opposite. I think we've broken the myth that getting an education automatically means leaving the rural areas."

While FUNDAEC goes on training promoters, technicians, and engineers, perfecting its curriculum, and finding technological solutions to villagers' problems, a nagging question remains. How far can people develop with such limited resources? Rural development where there is no land available to the farmers, says Dr Arbab, is meaningless.

The pattern of land tenure is unfavourable to the villagers of the region. But the correction of such a structural problem is beyond the ken of the rural university, which is nonpolitical. Perhaps FUNDAEC's contribution to Colombia's development is that it is providing the people of the Cauca Valley a way of improving their daily lives, however modestly and slowly, without resorting to violence or revolution.