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COMMENTARY

SELF-HELP: MEETING BASIC HUMAN NEEDS

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In Lusaka, Zambia, squatters built their own homes and landscaped their plots. An estimated two-thirds of the Third World's homes are built and occupied by the owners. After food, shelter is the most basic human need, if only because other needs are satisfied in relation to the home: food preparation and storage, child care and education, health, social life, and often, work.

The example of Lusaka reflects a growing wave of self-reliance in development. The 1980s may well come to convince most policy-makers that the key to meeting basic human needs in the Third World is the participation of individuals and communities in local problem-solving. It is this "grassroots" concept that is to be woven into regional, national, and even international development plans.

The focus on meeting basic human needs as the overwhelming goal of development stems from the bitter experience that mere economic growth -- no matter how substantial and protracted -- does not necessarily trickle down to the people who should stand to benefit most from it: the poor half of the Third World. In addition, the sheer transfer of sophisticated knowhow to backward regions does not guarantee development. It suffices to watch Bedouins pitching their tents at the doorsteps of apartment blocks built for them by the government and sheltering their goats inside the buildings, to acknowledge the limits to which the wonders of technology can be assimilated within one generation.

All this was poignantly summed up by Brazil's former President Médici who, when asked how his country was doing, used to reply wryly: "Brazil is doing alright, thank you, but not so the Brazilian people".

This is partly so because the rural people who constitute the majority of the Third World population tend to be bypassed by financial aid and technical assistance. This causes, in addition, floods of migration to urban centres that can neither provide their swelling masses with employment nor satisfy other basic needs. Local problem-solving as the key to development must, therefore, start in the rural areas.

Food

Throughout the ages, the struggle to obtain enough food has absorbed the daily energies of people. No developing country can blindly copy successful recipes of food production, but they might certainly be inspired to homegrown solutions of meeting basic needs. For example, Third World nations may learn a lesson from Taiwan's successful "land-to-the-tiller" program which, in one generation, doubled the number of farm families.

Surveys undertaken by the U.S. Agency for International Development in Brazil, Colombia, India, Guatemala, Mexico, Philippines, and South Korea indicate that small owner-operated farms enjoy a higher rate of productivity per hectare than large farms. Under certain circumstances, small-scale owner-operated farms may be induced to form cooperatives.

In the socialist countries, there is an awakening to the fact that private farm plots are more productive than collective agriculture. In China, for instance, one fourth of the people produce their own vegetables and much of their own meat (pigs, poultry). In America, an estimated 30 percent of the population raise fruits and vegetables wherever possible, partly to offset the rising cost of foodstuffs. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that many Third World governments have come to stress home vegetable-growing as a means of improving nutrition. Jamaica's "Grow your own food" campaign, for example, doubled the proportion of home-grown food in many rural regions in just over a decade. Thus, rural Jamaicans spend proportionately less income on food and, in the process, reduce the incidence of malnutrition.

Shelter

It is a deeply ingrained desire to own one's home on one's own land. This explains why in Mexico 60 percent, and in India 80 percent, of the conventional homes -- no matter how poor -- are owner-occupied, and that an estimated 65 percent of all homes in the Third World are built by private initiatives and efforts.

Shelter lends itself eminently to "do-it-yourself". The 300 000 houses in Chile's "Hogar de Cristo" were built from prefabricated wooden parts by squatters to replace their cardboard and sheetmetal shelters. In Iran's Lorestan community, the usual mud-and-brick dwellings were built, but they are connected to collective latrines detached from the living quarters. Using mud and brick as basic materials, an Egyptian architect has added bitumen, paraffin emulsions, and asphalt to stop moisture from seeping up from the ground.

Health

China's rural barefoot doctors and urban "worker doctors" provide basic health care, both preventive and curative. They diagnose and treat common diseases, run village health centres, and disseminate birth control information without assistance. They use indigenous herbal medicines as well as modern techniques. Tanzania's government provides the Ujamaa communal villages with dispensaries staffed by medical helpers and supported by fellow villagers.

These examples reflect the importance of self-reliance in meeting basic health needs. It demands a fundamental rethinking of the relationships between communities and their health services, the involvements of paramedics and nonprofessionals, and the role of women where they are presently barred by taboos and prejudice from giving such help. Cuba employs housewives and retired women who have minimal training to check hygiene, diet, and minor illnesses of pregnant women and children.

Other needs

The other basic needs most frequently acknowledged are clothing and education. And while it is not immediately evident that wood constitutes

a basic need, it is a vital raw material for shelter and fuel. Wood is also often required to make ploughs, build furniture, implements, fences, paper, and handicrafts.

Another basic need that is often underestimated is water. In Botswana, for instance, a country whose territory is largely covered by the Kalahari desert, both the currency and common greeting are called "pula" -- rain, a scarce commodity. Botswana's recent discovery of a huge diamond mine may catapult the nation into modern age, but is insufficient to defray the cost of pumping the crystal clear waters of Okavango across the Kalahari desert to where most inhabitants live.

Although self-help and a community spirit may not provide Botswana with adequate water, it goes a long way to satisfy basic needs. It is therefore necessary that development decisions be made as close to the grassroots as is possible. Financial and technical assistance from abroad, no matter how important, should be instrumental in mobilizing local resources and talents, rather than superimposing an alien model of development.

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