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**Sustainability in Agricultural
Development Programmes:
The Approach of USAID**

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This Gatekeeper Series is produced by the International Institute for Environment and Development to highlight key topics in the field of sustainable agriculture. Each paper reviews a selected issue of contemporary importance and draws preliminary conclusions of relevance to development activities. References are provided to important sources and background material.

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SUSTAINABILITY IN AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES: THE APPROACH OF USAID¹

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Introduction

Recently great progress has been made in the United States over collaboration between leading environmental organisations, private voluntary organisations, research and academic groups and individual scientists and experts on the topic of agricultural sustainability for developing countries. These individuals and organisations represent a very broad spectrum of expertise on agricultural issues, and have recently identified a shared purpose through the establishment of the Committee on Agricultural Sustainability for Developing Countries. Growing practical collaboration between groups has led to a greater understanding of problems and in particular has produced a clearer picture of the necessary requirements for achieving sustainability.

The Environmental Record of USAID

The environmental record of the United States Agency for International Development (AID) as it applies to agricultural and rural development programmes can be summarised by seven statements.

1. AID is making progress in promoting environmentally sound agricultural development. Furthermore, AID is not explicitly supporting agricultural or rural development projects which are environmentally detrimental.
2. AID in Washington has in the last two years begun to make agricultural sustainability and its natural resource protection component a greater part of the focus of its agricultural policies and outlook. Its statements in this regard go further than those of most development agencies: in this regard the leaders are the Bureau of Science & Technology and for Bureau Africa.

1. This paper is a summary of recent testimony by the Chairman of the committee on Agricultural Sustainability to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Washington, 7 March 1989

3. Through its environmental assessment process, and in some countries through its policy discussions with governments, AID has begun to do an increasingly good job of helping developing nations come to grips with the natural resource problems of agricultural development.
4. AID has for many years supported natural resource-oriented agricultural research. This research is carried out through some national agricultural research systems and through the international agricultural research centres. AID has also helped countries develop natural resource-sensitive research institutions and personnel. However, its record in research institution building is not without flaws.
5. Field missions, with a few exceptions, have not yet done a particularly good job in helping developing countries think through the problems and importance of achieving agricultural sustainability. Nor have many field missions thoroughly analysed their own agricultural programmes in terms of sustainability.
6. AID-Washington has been increasingly making available to field missions the resources for better environmental management of agricultural development. However, it would appear that insufficient field missions have chosen to "buy into" these projects.
7. Field missions, through programmes of private voluntary organisations and otherwise, are supporting a few, but still far from enough projects which can serve as models for environmentally sensitive agricultural development, particularly on less well-endowed lands.

All this adds up to the following: AID-Washington is doing a good and increasingly better job of promoting policies favouring environmentally sensitive agricultural development. However, AID'S field missions, with notable exceptions, have still not moved far enough and fast enough towards making sustainability a major focus for their agricultural programmes. Nor has AID-Washington yet given the field missions a strong enough lead in this regard.

The difference between Washington and the field often seems to lie in the different perceptions and different priorities of mission directors, and depends to a great degree upon their own environmental sensitivity. From all this derives the point that giving the field missions autonomy for programme determination must have its limitations. Of course broad generalisations like these can be unfair to some outstanding people, projects, and missions.

Achieving Sustainability

There are two critical reasons why AID should help developing countries achieve sustainability in their agricultural development. First, sustainability is a powerful political paradigm. If sustainability is achieved, it answers the question that Congress must always ask, namely is the money we are spending resulting in real development? Secondly, AID's having to apply the test of sustainability adds an element of very desirable rigour to both initial and continuing evaluations of AID's agricultural (and other) programmes and projects.

But of course agricultural sustainability does not depend only on environmental sustainability. Sustainability cannot be achieved in agriculture or any other area except by also assuring economic, political, sociological, and institutional sustainability. If concerned groups tend to emphasise the environmental and ecological facets of this problem, it is because these aspects have too often not been given enough attention by development agencies including AID.

Like other large institutions, AID tends at times to resist change. But once it recognizes or is forced to recognize new and constructive elements, and once it recognizes that a new element is here to stay, it moves ahead rapidly and with good will to incorporate it into its operational doctrine. So it is with the environmental and natural resources. Fuelled by the enthusiasm and insights of its younger officers who had their formative years of education in the environmental era, AID has the potential to become a leader in environmental development among economic assistance agencies. Old and good programmes for the protection of soil and water have been given greater recognition and have been incorporated more integrally into AID's agriculture efforts.

At times this concern for the environment has less specifically applied to the newer aspects of agricultural programmes and projects. Also there has been some tendency to separate artificially agriculture from natural resources and the environment. There has also been some tendency to over-emphasise the importance of macroeconomic aspects of agriculture.

Some missions and some bureaux have given less priority than we believe they should and could to helping countries properly use their less well endowed lands. The theory has been that AID could get a bigger payoff for its scarce resources by giving priority to increasing productivity on the best lands. While there may be some merit to this viewpoint, it would be misguided to concentrate upon it exclusively. Almost all developing nations must find ways to increase productivity on their less well endowed lands as well as on their best lands since most of their farmers and indeed much of their lands fall into the former category. Also a substantial amount of attention must be paid to improving agricultural productivity on marginal lands. The challenge of helping developing countries better utilise marginal lands simply must not be avoided.

Strengths and Weaknesses

This brings up another aspect of agricultural policy which deserves attention, namely in what areas does AID, and the United States generally, enjoy a relative or unique advantage, relative particularly to the World Bank? It is the contention of our Committee, and generally of the organisations that make it up, that AID has a unique ability (and even greater potential) to help developing nations build their capacities for the environmental management of agriculture. This, we believe, should be a (if not the) principal focus of US agricultural development effort, whether that effort is concerned with education and training, with US policy dialogue, with developing countries, or with helping create new models of agricultural sustainability in rural development.

Another cross cutting way to look at the environmental dimensions of agricultural and rural development policies and programmes is to look at the strengths and weaknesses relative to both AID'S own and the total national potential, and relative to the capacity of other development assistance agencies. First here is a list of a few of AID's strengths.

A major strength is an increasing insistence on the importance of "bottom up" development. Most staff are well grounded on the central truth that unless farmers think that the changes proposed to them will be in their own self interest, will bring them early returns, and will not unduly increase their risks, they won't cooperate. On a recent trip to India and Pakistan, AID officers were heard to insist repeatedly on the importance of getting farmers' agreement and participation in development projects as a pre-condition for moving ahead. And that's very good.

A second strength is a persistence in the defence of the principle that private gain is generally a better guarantee of success in agricultural development than governmental management. AID has been quite imaginative in pursuing this principle, for example, in urging the raising of electric rates to avoid over pumping of ground water in Pakistan. In my experience, other development assistance agencies will often join us in an initial assertion of this important principle, but will too easily leave to others the burden of pursuing it.

A third strong point is the pleasure and attitude that personnel show for actually working in the countryside with their government counterparts, as well as with farmers and their families and organisations. Too often recently, however, this has been made difficult because of overwhelming paperwork requirements or shortage of travel funds.

A fourth strength is the continued support for the building up and even the formation of local organisations, including farm organisations and farm groups for help in implementing projects, although frankly more missions should be involved in this process. There are many occasions when national or local organisations in the developing world, quietly supported and encouraged by AID, have made a big difference in getting governments which are slow or insensitive to the environmental dimensions of agriculture to move ahead.

A fifth strength is AID's talent for working with and through US private voluntary agencies and their local associates in sensitive developmental situations. Where (as often is the case) AID missions have worked closely with "PVO's", they have often achieved good results in terms of agricultural sustainability.

Now the weaknesses in agricultural development. First is the tendency not to stick with projects long enough. Changes, particularly changes involving new or more difficult ways to manage soil, water or vegetative cover, usually require long years of attention and the continuing extension of some incentives to achieve success. The most common reason for not sticking with a project long enough is the frequent rotation of people responsible for projects or the arrival of new superiors who are determined to put their own stamp on a programme, even if this means abandoning projects that have a good chance of success.

But, let's face it, we Americans have a reputation for loving to change things, often just for change's sake.

A second, and associated, weakness, seen in agricultural projects as well as in other aspects of development, is to give priority to the uncomplicated agricultural project which does not require heavy personnel input. This is perhaps understandable in the face of AID missions' heavy programmatic responsibilities. But in our view it reflects a grave misreading of what is required in most developing countries at this stage of rural development, particularly as it effects natural resource management.

What is most badly needed is to find and support people with a willingness to spend all the time and attention necessary to design and implement difficult but ground-breaking agriculture projects, and to work with farmers to ensure that they have all the input they want into the planning and execution of projects that involve them. Social forestry projects in India provide prime examples of projects that succeed if the time is taken to work out the complicated equity aspects of common property management, but fail if this is not done. We must be less concerned with the movement of money and be ready to do fewer and better projects if necessary. We need more officers in touch with projects and less people doing paperwork. This will require more travel to the field from Washington and from field posts to the countryside - and much more latitude to use project funds for travel.

A third weakness in agricultural and natural resource management, and one difficult to overcome, is a tendency to approach projects from too narrow a perspective - to look, for example, at soil projects without considering water quality. Good interdisciplinary analysis is always hard to come by, but more agricultural projects fall down from too narrow a approach than from just about any other cause. In this, of course, AID is not alone among development assistance agencies.

Finally a narrow "environmental" view of AID's agricultural projects and programmes must be avoided like the plague. Environmental considerations should be integrally incorporated into every project, and strictly "environmental" projects should be avoided.

Conclusions

How does all this add up? The question is often asked, are AID's agriculture and rural development efforts having an impact on global or even country specific agricultural development commensurate with the urgency and gravity of the problem that the world faces in feeding its growing millions? The answer is an obvious no. To accomplish this would require a programme of resource transfer financially unbearable to the US and unacceptable to recipient countries. That is not what collaborative assistance in agriculture for the last decade of this century is all about. Developing countries must in the final analysis solve their own agricultural problems, and development assistance agencies' efforts can at best hope to do little more than help supply necessary infrastructure, plus, and most important, provide the scientific and human spark and the incentives which will assist farmers and policy makers to get agricultural development moving towards sustainability.

A better question to ask about AID's agricultural efforts is, does what AID is doing in agriculture make a real difference? Or should we, as some suggest, minimize programme-oriented efforts in agriculture and adopt a trade-oriented, strictly private enterprise approach to development, agricultural and otherwise? The answer to the second question is a resounding no: this will not work.

In fact there are a whole series of US collaborative efforts in agricultural development that are making and have made a real difference to developing countries. The first "Green Revolution", based on the broad use of high yielding varieties of grains, irrigation, and fertilizer, was in no small part an AID supported effort. For all its problems and limitations, this innovation made a major impact on global agriculture. AID and the United States more generally are, I'm convinced, also making a real contribution to the coming "second green revolution", one in which sustainability and good natural resource management will be a major focus, and one which will, what's more, benefit a much larger number of farmers. Already there is enough new technology and new insights into agricultural natural resource management which, if adapted to the needs of particular groups of farmers, could make a big difference to their lives.

One good way to summarise the view of many is to address the question of what a new economic cooperation act should prescribe about agricultural development. The time has come to review and revise our Foreign Assistance Act, to slim down its objectives, and to cut paperwork drastically. Slashing reporting requirements with the aim of giving AID's field personnel more time to work more closely with farmers and agricultural officers would be very favourable. Enthusiastic support should be given to any legislation which is directed to those objectives.

Prescriptive Measures for the 1990s

The central purpose of development assistance should be to promote environmentally sustainable broad-based economic growth. We further agree that efforts must be focused on a small number of key objectives, one of which must be sustainable agricultural development. New legislation should place primary emphasis on helping farmers (and governments) make this transition to sustainable agricultural systems. AID's efforts in this regard should also encompass better management of sustaining non-agricultural natural systems (forests, watersheds and water resources, for example) as well as associated energy systems.

The combating of global warming through maximising biomass and minimising methane-, nitrous oxide-, and carbon dioxide-producing agricultural activities must also be a focus of these activities.

The highest value should be placed on AID's continuing support to developing countries' family planning programmes, upon which the ultimate success of all that we advocate depends.

In working towards agricultural sustainability the greatest emphasis should be placed on developing human resources at all levels of agricultural effort, on training and motivating people who can help energize the small farmer, as well as the researcher in agronomy and the government planner. Development assistance organisations should make special use of the developed countries' comparative advantage in science and technology through the expansion of collaborative and cooperative relationships in agriculture, including efforts that involve people from the advanced developing and newly industrialized countries. In addition these agencies should be continuing strong support for the international agriculture research centres.

Congressional provisions for much longer commitment to successful agriculture programmes should be supported, together with continuing US assistance to local farm organisations both directly and through private voluntary organisations.

In all these efforts strong reliance should be placed on utilizing the talents represented by US universities and scientific institutions. Ways must be found to recreate and sustain the links between US universities and agricultural experts which were so strong and mutually beneficial in 50's and 60's but which are now eroding.

On another level, continuing efforts to strengthen the position of the small farmer and the landless and to reinforce equity within farming communities should be sought. Combating rural poverty is essential to environmentally sound rural development. The United States must remain the strong advocate of "bottom up" agricultural development.

Slimmed down US economic assistance should, with a few exceptions where major US financial leverage will continue to exist, continue to play only a supporting role in global programmes of structural adjustment. Finance should be restricted to only relatively small agricultural infra-structural programmes.

Finally giving aid-giving organisations more flexibility in the use of funds, but only within Congressionally established guidelines, would ensure a focused, balanced approach which will provide continuity of purpose and programme.



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The Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Programme

The Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Programme of IIED promotes and supports the development of socially and environmentally aware agriculture through policy research, training and capacity strengthening, networking and information dissemination, and advisory services.

The Programme emphasises close collaboration and consultation with a wide range of institutions in the South. Collaborative research projects are aimed at identifying the constraints and potentials of the livelihood strategies of the Third World poor who are affected by ecological, economic and social change. These initiatives focus on the development and application of participatory approaches to research and development; resource conserving technologies and practices; collective approaches to resource management; the value of wild foods and resources; rural-urban interactions; and policies and institutions that work for sustainable agriculture.

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