Some Problems Facing Rural Development Programs in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses briefly some problems inherent in the introduction of Western technology and values into Ethiopia. Ethiopia's population, while not large, is sufficient to utilize its abundant agricultural resources,

but considerable redistribution of population will be necessary for optimum development. Strong home ties of the peasantry may make such redistribution difficult.

A major problem of rural development will be that of instilling a motivation for higher production into the Ethiopian peasant farmer. Incentives toward production have been weak, partly because the feudal tenure systems have offered little reward for effort. Also, the emphasis upon the numerous religious holidays often conflicts with an efficient routine of agricultural tasks.

In technology, the Ethiopian farmer continues in Biblical fashion. Portions of Ethiopia subscripe to a widespread African point of view which recognizes quantity of cattle as important, but places little emphasis upon quality. The marketing of Ethiopian products abroad is handicapped by the poor quality of much produce.

Agricultural advance is an important aspect of a complex of problems facing Ethiopia. Resolving these problems can best be effected through an integrated program attacking various interrelated aspects of Ethiopian needs simultaneously.

Personnel from Oklahoma A. & M. College are building in Ethiopia a program of agricultural and mechanical education modelled on that of the United States. This particular project is an important part of the program of the Technical Cooperation Administration (popularly known as Point Four) in Ethiopia. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss briefly the nature of some of the problems inherent in the introduction of Western technology and values to Ethiopians.

Unlike many underdeveloped areas of the world, Ethiopia is not handicapped by a rural population far too large to be supported adequately by Western standards. On the contrary, she has an abundance of fertile land and a relatively small population. The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations estimated in 1948 that 66 per cent of the land area of Ethiopia could be cultivated or used for grazing, which means a total of about 284,000 square miles of potential utilization—an acreage considerably larger than the total land area of Texas. Only 123,500 square miles—less than half the potential—is at present so utilized, and of this land, only about 27,000 square miles is in field crops. In addition, another 20,000 square miles, not included in the above estimates because of altitude, is considered suitable for the grazing of sheep and goats. The soil of this vast potential area is, for the most part, good; much is described as very good.

In the highlands, rainfall is abundant—45 to 50 inches annually, although most of this does fall in a summer rainy season. Variations in altitude make possible the production of a wide variety of temperate and tropical products. Much of Ethiopia is made-to-order for livestock, and is at present so utilized. There are more cattle than there are people (approximately 15,000,000 or one-sixth the number of cattle in the United States), plus some 25,000,000 sheep and goats. Despite these numbers, the liestock industry is capable of marked expansion if markets can be developed. A greater need at present than expansion of numbers is improvement in quality.

Despite the abundance of land, some sections of Ethiopia are quite thickly-settled—overpopulated, indeed, from the point of view of a desirable man-land ratio for the utilization of efficient agricultural techniques. Other vast areas are very thinly settled. An obviously desirable undertaking is to encourage the excess farm population of the thickly-settled areas to colonize new sections of the potential agricultural empire, permitting greater acreage per farm family and bringing into production territory

now unused, thus increasing both the national output and the output per family. An obstacle, however, lies in the distance from the thickly-settled rural areas to the major undeveloped districts. Since the ties of the Ethiopian peasant to his community and kin are very strong, he is reluctant to leave his own locality.

Overcoming this reluctance is but a special aspect of the entire problem of providing the Ethiopian peasantry with adequate (by Western standards) motivation for greater production. Developing motivation toward production is fully as important a goal of our agricultural program in Ethiopia as is the imparting of technical knowledge as such. It is in the past Americans have often overlooked the problem of motivation. It is obvious to us that other peoples need training in *how* to do; we have sometimes failed to realize that they may also have to be trained to *want* to do—at times, a much harder job.

A relevant problem to be considered in this connection is the land system. More accurately, one should say land systems, because the variations from province to province are very great, with a general tendency for the northern part of the country to have a more nearly independent freeholder population than elsewhere. Even in the North, however, the traditional *gabar* systems of tenure continue.

Despite many variations in detail, the general nature of the *gabar* systems of land tenure may be stated. The nearest approach to these systems familiar to people of European heritage can be found in the feudalism of medieval Europe. Nominally, the Emperor is the owner of land; however, the rases, governors, military leaders, church, and other large landholders in the various provinces actually control the land under them. They collect a "tithe" of varying amount from the peasantry, a portion of which, at least in theory, passes on to the Emperor. In the past, this collection and transfer of revenue up the hierarchy was done in produce. This practice continues in much of the country because cash and commercial production are lacking.

A variation of this system, more in theory than in actual practice, is also widespread. The peasant farmer (or, in some sections, his village or kinship group) is considered as owner of the land. In exchange for protection, however, the individual owner owes his superiors an amount in labor. This he pays, either by working on their estates, or, more often, by paying in produce the equivalent of the amount of labor owed. Thus, in actuality, this works out about the same as it does when some overlord is acknowledged as owner. In both instances, the peasant has security of tenure, but has to donate labor and/or produce.

It is proof of the fertility of the land that, despite an inefficient technology and an oppressive land system, the peasantry has not only maintained its own subsistence but at the same time has supported the large number of priests, monks, the military, the provincial and national leaders, and their often quite impressive retinues. An old Ethiopian saying states, "Each peasant carries other members of society on his back." Considering the technological level, it is true that the Ethiopian peasantry has managed to support an unusually large nonproducing population.

One of the most serious implications of the system has been the lack of incentive for the peasant to produce up to his full potential. If he worked hard and produced very much, most of the extra bounty would probably be taken. Little reward has existed for extra effort, and little extra effort, therefore, has been customary. In the past, also, the armies have simply "lived off the land", so again, the peasant assumed that what others didn't get, the soldiers well might.

Another aspect of Ethiopian customs which often has the effect of reducing potential production lies in the very real devotion which the

Ethiopian countryman has for his religion and its many fasts and holy days. Very often, it has seemed to outsiders that when an agricultural task conflicts with a ceremony, it has not been the ceremony which suffered. Since their ancient form of Christianity has been one of the greatest unifying forces in Ethiopian life, this is the sort of thing which the outsider should criticize slowly, if at all. The best technique may simply be to teach Ethiopian students the importance of doing the various tasks at the optimum moment, and leave to them the solution of such conflicts between work demands and the traditional religious calendar. If an outsider makes himself unpopular as an enemy of the faith, his influence will simply be the less.

Concerning agricultural technology itself, training must be developed to supplant present farm practices which date from Biblical times. The modern Ethiopians claim descent from an ancient Semitic people, akin to the ancient Jews and to the Arabs, who entered the highlands several centuries before Christ. Their technology has changed little in the more than 2,000 years which have elapsed. Unlike their African neighbors, but like the people of Biblical lands, the Ethiopians have a plow—a simple wooden plow with a point, often, of iron, drawn by two oxen. Like the people of the Bible too, they appreciate the value of terracing hill fields, and terrace them in a manner still found in Arabia. Although this practice has reduced the erosion damage, this still is one of the major problems of the country, because very heavy rains during the rainy season produce a tremendous run-off on the steep slopes. As in Biblical times, oxen tread the grain on the threshing floors; it is still winnowed by tossing it into the wind. Irrigation, on a cooperative basis, is practiced locally in some areas by techniques drawn from the ancient world. However, even simple techniques of irrigation are not used nearly as widely as they could be.

The Ethiopians understand the need for crop rotation to some degree, but their heavy dependence upon grain crops keeps them from utilizing legumes or other soil-replenishing crops to any great extent. The principal solution to depleted fertility has been simply to permit the land to lie fallow a few years, letting the native grasses grow and using it as pasture, while former pasture lands are put under the plow—which is, incidentally, a difficult task with the heavy grass cover and the primitive plow in use. Despite the large number of animals, the use of manure as fertilizer seems little practiced. Nor is any other source of fertilizing common. The wheeled cart and wagon were reportedly not known in Ethiopia until contact with Europeans in the last century, and even now most of the transporting of agricultural products from farm to market or railhead is done on the backs of mules and donkeys (and in some Moslem and other sections, women).

There is, in most parts of the country, little storage of fodder, except for use by horses (highly-prized possessions). This means that the seasonal loss of weight of cattle in the dry period is greater than would be necessary in so productive a country. Indeed, although the Ethiopians understand the essentials of animal breeding (demonstrated by their pride in the quality of their horses), they seldom apply this knowledge to their cattle.

A custom which is widespread throughout much of eastern Africa is found to some extent in Ethiopia. This is a tendency to evaluate the prestige of a man by the number of cattle that he owns. Possession of cattle gives a man the equivalent of wealth in that it makes him powerful and respected. This system of values is a real handicap to the improvement of the livestock, because the quality of the herd counts for less than its quantity. Attempts to teach these people to protect their entire herd by killing diseased animals, to invest in buying a better bull instead of half-a-dozen scrawny cattle, etc., will be difficult. Again, this is the sort of problem about which foreigners may not be able to accomplish much by direct means. The best technique may be that of showing Ethiopian students

the desirability of better stock, and leaving it to them, who after all will know better than we how to approach their own people, to bring about the change in attitude which is necessary. One hopeful factor in this connection is that this custom is most deeply embedded in the Galla and Arussi sections of southern Ethiopia. The Amharas, the dominant group in the country, depend less exclusively upon cattle and do more farming, and may be more amenable to instruction in this respect.

Another problem of Ethiopian agriculture is the low quality of much of the produce. Pack animal transportation contributes to this through wastage, impurities from sweat and from frequent handling. Moreover, standards of production itself are often low in terms of quality. Ethiopian natives accept poor grades of flour, coffee, oilseeds, etc., intermingled with better produce, as a hazard of the marketplace. The Ethiopians have not been particularly squeamish about the cleanliness of their produce. Thus, the peasant has never bothered to be careful in such matters. Yet, frequent impurities, lack of grading, and lack of cleanliness have handicapped the marketing of Ethiopian produce abroad.

In closing, it should be emphasized that the solution of these and other related problems of rural development can hardly be accomplished overnight, nor in a piecemeal manner. Indeed, the Ethiopians, in attempting to improve agricultural conditions, face not merely a number of discrete handicaps, but an entire complex of factors, agricultural and otherwise, which the Point Four program is trying to help them solve. Agricultural advance alone, for example, would be futile, for surplus production is of no use unless marketing facilities are available, which again, are dependent upon adequate transportation facilities and reasonable shipping costs. These, on the other hand, can hardly be provided economically unless there is promise of surplus production by the peasants. The hope of development in Ethiopia, as in other underdeveloped countries, seems to lie in attacking such related problems simultaneously in an integrated program.