The Sociology of Economic Development

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In the sense that operational consequences are always a criterion for evaluating knowledge, it seems that recent technical assistance and economic development programs have proved a windfall for social science.¹ For some 15 years now the historical supremacy of older, more precise, "hard" sciences has been challenged by the experiences of Western technical experts in their attempts to guide social change in underdeveloped countries. The challenge reflects, I believe, a slow and often painful realization that economic development is essentially a complex sociological phenomenon, and not, as we Americans have often assumed, merely a problem of superimposing Western techniques and organization upon the indigenous cultures of traditional societies. However, we are not entirely to blame for this easy assumption, since our own patterns of socialization have inculcated a free and easy receptivity to technical change that masks the difficulty of achieving change in such societies.

My aim in this essay is to suggest that social science has much to offer in analysing the cultural roots of technical change and, possibly, in helping bring it about. Sociology seems especially useful in this context because its major themes and constructs involve social systems, their institutions, values, and time-honored mores, all of which are critical for change. Gunnar Myrdal has recently posed the sociological context of technical change in poorer countries:

The initial situation in all these countries is one where most of the people are culturally isolated in local and provincial communities, and often split within these communities by social, religious, and ethnic chasms, and usually by extraordinarily wide economic inequalities. This stale and rigid social structure, which is not conducive to cooperation for economic development, is the consequence of long stagnation. Now it is the major obstacle to progress.²

Myrdal speaks of social class, cultural isolation, religious and ethnic values, social structure — essentially socio-psychological realities whose understanding

¹ The following remarks reflect my own experiences (liberally mixed with hindsight) with a United Nations technical assistance program in the Middle East. I have been especially impressed by the difficulty of introducing change in a "foreign" society when the agents of change are usually (and often necessarily) selected on the basis of technical expertise, with little knowledge of social science or the culture of the host country.

requires a confluence of social sciences, and a cultural sensitivity which has not been characteristic of technically-oriented, Western, capitalistic society. Gradually, however, we are learning that economic development is, in a sense, indivisible; it must proceed in a multi-faceted way in which ideological change, modification of traditional social structures, education, transportation, health, industrial development, and the rest, move forward in some roughly equal progression. This conceptual innovation is largely the result of an emerging sociology of economic development.

It is a social science truism that the accurate delineation of a problem is more important and more difficult than its solution. The art of asking the right questions, of restructuring conventional patterns of thought and conception, is often the most creative part of innovation. But one does not conceptualize in a vacuum. Tools in the form of constructs, disciplinary training, definitions, and method are required, particularly where one's initial perceptions and knowledge of a national culture are tentative and confused, as is the case not only with the foreign expert in a strange society, but equally so of the technically-oriented "nonindigenous" resident of the society who also lacks such tools. It is most revealing to observe a group of skilled technicians and businessmen, who may have lived in a given foreign country a decade or more but are unable to define the existing problems and requirements of social change simply because they have not had the training which would permit a sociological or psychological conceptualization of the issue. Nor could one fairly expect that experts in applied fields should be able to do so.

Precisely here, it seems to me, social science has a great opportunity to test the validity of its formulations. More significant for those who believe that it is not fatal for a discipline to have practical consequences, social science can help bring about the revolution in satisfactions that poorer countries demand. Many social scientists would put it more positively that we have a compelling moral obligation to do what we can to enhance human equality and opportunity. Even at the uninspired level of national selfinterest in maintaining an equilibrium in world society, our course is clear enough. For these reasons social science may soon enjoy a gratifying recognition as being among the most relevant disciplines for achieving the most pressing goal of this century: the equalization of human opportunity, security, and dignity on an international scale.

Let me suggest a few social science concepts that seem useful in facilitating technical assistance, broadly defined as a problem of social change.

In the context of the critical need to find out what problems are most relevant to our efforts to effect social change, the concept of socialization seems most useful. (I am not speaking here of an unconscious or haphazard application of such concepts, but rather of a positive use of the whole battery of accumulated tools and systematic knowledge). Somehow, we tend to be fully aware of the mechanics and consequences of socialization in our own society, but often we do not bring the same objectivity and analytic skill to our confrontation of another national culture. Anthropologists, of course, are an exception, and I am speaking here mainly of those of us who have tried to carry out technical