

SECOND CARNEGIE INQUIRY INTO POVERTY
AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA.

Education: The rural poor:
The delusion of basic education

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EDUCATION : THE RURAL POOR : THE DELUSION OF BASIC EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

"Rural education" is a term much open to abuse and misunderstanding. It is self evident that rural and urban education form the ends of a continuum and that few communities will present a totally rural or totally urban picture. However, the terms rural and urban are basically geographical terms with specific meanings. Yet they have an important sociological and educational referent. As long as 1894 courses were being taught in the USA under the heading of Rural Sociology. Early writings were concerned with the farming family and its social relations, the location of settlements, the supply of labour - often in a descriptive or discursive style rather than one based on deep analysis. By 1936, funded from US federal grants poured into rural surveys and research, rural sociology had become respectable and the "Rural Sociology Journal" first appeared. Sorokin and Zimmerman produced the first major text (which is still in use) in 1929 and their systematic comparison of urban and rural life-styles became a conceptual breakthrough. Later writers were to emphasise the rural-urban continuum (Smith and Zopf; 1970) and even today find it difficult to break away from the ethnocentricity of the traditions of American mid-western rural sociology.

Community studies have provided a more fruitful model for a wider spectrum of people studying both rural and urban sociology. Community is not necessarily related to rurality but many UK studies of community have in fact been of small rural communities and this approach has now become more or less synonymous with rural sociology.

1. RURAL COMMUNITIES

These have generally been perceived as slow-moving, non-progressive, attractive (to urbanites) yet dull. Tonnies (1957) saw rural life as characterised by associations of

- kinship (blood ties)
- friendship (mind)
- neighbourliness (land)

A man's status in his community was defined by his place in a hierarchy. Rural societies were therefore seen as

- stable
- intimate
- resistant to outside influences

Urban life, by contrast, has been seen as characterised by people bound together by rational contract, therefore dynamic and open to change.

The work of Smith and Zopf is useful to our discussion in that they present an eightfold typology of rural communities:

1. Rural communities have a narrower pattern of occupations;
2. Rural communities are generally of small size;
3. There is a lower density of population;
4. There is a higher quality physical environment (i.e. more "natural");
5. There is less complex social differentiation and social stratification;
6. There are fewer opportunities for social mobility;
7. There is a smaller social world;
8. There is greater social solidarity.

Despite point 4 above we could add to this sociological analysis that generally, rural communities have fewer of the cultural and educational amenities which urban communities enjoy e.g. schools (of high quality), libraries, clinics and hospitals, public entertainment facilities, access to the media, access to political leadership, and so on.

But the neat analysis of Smith and Zopf has several difficulties associated with it. First is the phenomenon of the "urban village", whether that be Serowe or Bethnal Green (an ethnic Jewish community embedded in the East End of London). Place of living and style of living should not be too readily associated.

Pahl (1966) argues that differences between urban and rural life are caused by:

- Low population densities and small settlement size (the geographical/demographical definitions of rurality) which give rise to problems in providing services like education;
- A confrontation between national and local needs which has led to the decline of remote communities - the powerful centre and the weak periphery.

As far as education is concerned, the point being made here is that the problems of rural education are not different in kind from those of urban areas and are not brought about by the supposed characteristics of rural life. The problematic nature of rural education is determined by the relationships which exist between the urban centres and the rural areas.

In broad terms the problematic areas have proved to be

- conflicting demands for an education related to the local economy and for one which provides access to high status academic knowledge
- attempts to make rural schooling conform to urban patterns
- the role of education in predominantly rural societies
- the relationship between the centre and the periphery

Summary

The terms Rural Community, Rural Development and Community Development share considerable areas of overlap. To summarise the major concepts requires the following formulation:

- The context :
- relative geographical isolation
 - small population
 - low density of population
 - low incomes

- limited occupations (mainly agricultural)
- resistance to change
- subject to "nature" rather than manipulative of it
- socially affiliative communities (primary relationships)
- limited amenities
- politically, socially, intellectually peripheral
- traditionalist

- The Challenge:
- desire to raise living standards
 - commitment to process rather than product
 - achievement of self-sustaining, self-motivated change
 - attempts to use a weak agricultural base for development
 - the integration of developmental agencies
 - reduction of centre-periphery tensions
 - development of local capacities for decision making management

2. THE ISOLATED LEARNING COMMUNITY

This concept may be applied to an educational enterprise located anywhere on the rural-urban continuum. The term "isolated" is the crucial descriptor. It is used in this context to describe a group of learners (a school, an adult literacy class, a university) which has the following characteristics:

- separation (socially, politically, intellectually etc) from the main stream of educational thought and progress
- low levels of internal and external efficiency
- high rates of wastage
- low rates of financial input
- powerlessness amongst local leadership
- low levels of educational relevance to the real world
- low levels of professional expertise in the community
- inadequate resource allocation

In addition, an Isolated Learning Community may in fact be geographically isolated or inaccessible.

3. CURRENT THINKING ON RURAL EDUCATION

Briefly summarised, current thinking on rural education runs as follows:

- Conventional schooling will prove too costly if rural educational provision is to match urban provision.
- Population growth rates are outstripping enrolment rates.
- Political will to educate is the crucial factor in educational provision.
- Although 80% of Africans live in rural areas, urbanization is stripping these areas of skilled manpower.
- Western development patterns cannot be repeated in LDC's.
- Conventional schooling contributes to urbanisation.
- A separate, specifically "rural" education is unworkable and unacceptable.
- Educational developments must be linked to participatory community development.
- Educational technology has not proved a viable and cost-effective vehicle for rural schooling.
- Rural dependency is the crucial problem which schooling alone cannot solve.
- Education must be redefined to include non-formal and informal education if it is to make any contribution to stimulating community development.
- Immediate as well as long-range needs of individuals and communities must be catered for.
- Participation, motivation and mobilization of local personnel is the preferred approach.

4. CURRENT THINKING ON "EDUCATION FOR "ALL" (Unesco 1983)

- Educational spending curves are flattening out, especially in the developed world, yet -
- Illiteracy is still endemic (60.3% of adult Africans, 37.4% of adult Asians in 1980 were illiterate) and growing in absolute numbers;
- Illiteracy is inevitably accompanied by poverty, poor health and unemployment;
- Undereducated youth accounts for another large section of the population;
- A twofold attack on illiteracy involves improvement of basic education and development of adult literacy programmes;
- Formal education systems often lack the resources, manpower and organisational structure to provide universal schooling;
- Unesco policy is
 - : development and renewal of primary education
 - : eradication of illiteracy
 - : democratization of education (towards equity)

- : removal of discrimination against girls and women
- : Promotion of lifelong education for all

5. BASIC EDUCATION AND THE RURAL COMMUNITY

The concept of Basic Education is not new and it covers a wide range of formulations. For instance, in Zambia it refers to the whole compulsory schooling cycle; in Brazil it means an alternative to conventional primary schooling. The de Lange Commission has another definition of Basic Education. H M Phillips (1975) uses the concept of "minimum learning needs" in the sense of a "minimum social requirement, like the number of calories needed to secure freedom from hunger". In developing countries minimum needs would include

- literacy
- numeracy
- adequate verbal expression
- knowledge of citizenship
- knowledge of the physical and social environment
- knowledge of health and nutrition

all these learned by methods which arouse curiosity, develop self-reliance and encourage adaptability. Unesco refers to Basic Education as "the education which all citizens are entitled to" and which will enable them to lead "a reasonably human life as individuals and to function contentedly and effectively in society, the society referred to being their own, and the one in which the majority is likely to spend most of their lives".

Normally, Basic Education is not seen in isolation. It is one of a number of essential services for the individual and cannot survive if these other services - health care, adequate nutrition etc - are neglected. Coombs (1981) summarises the "new rhetoric of the new consensus which was becoming common coinage throughout the world". It includes such terms as

- meeting the basic needs of the rural poor
- growth with equity
- community participation

- integrated approaches
- improving the status of women
- generating rural employment

But the problem with Coomb's summary is that it remains rhetoric, just as Unesco's "eradication of illiteracy" and "democratization of education" remain rhetoric and will always be perceived this way unless real attempts are made to answer the "how and why" questions begged by the rhetoric. It may be argued that unless Unesco and the international mandarins provide a programme of action then what to do remains as vague as how to do it and why. Yet the what to do is meaningless until the other questions are tackled.

The central purpose of education has been described as the development of the human being such that he can direct his own further development. As R H Green (1977) expresses it -

"The first task of education is to create both an understanding that change is possible and the knowledge of alternatives leading to the desired change. The second is to enable individuals and communities to identify what types of change they wish to achieve and how to set out to attain them. The third is the training in particular skills and the provision of particular pieces of knowledge". Green's formulation itself begs a question or two, particularly the questions surrounding the possibility of change in certain societies. Yet what Green has to say about the purpose of education for the rural poor looks much more like a programme for empowerment than do the Unesco proposals.

6. THE DELUSION OF BASIC EDUCATION

If, as seems evident, the concept of Basic Education arose as an answer to the mass education demands and needs of an increasingly numerous under-educated sector of the world's population, then its promotion of a survival package of minimum learning needs is obviously valuable. But whilst the content of the package remains recognisably a disguised re-run of the conventional primary school package and whilst its methods and approaches take little or no cognisance of the social and political environment of its recipients then it is a "delusion, a mockery and a snare".

Yet Basic Education has become as accepted an educational prescription as adult education or non-formal education. It has been reified - it exists and is promoted and legitimated by some weight of international opinion and practice. Margaret Mbilinyi in a slightly hysterical "Prospects" article (Vol.7, No.4, 1977) asks whether Basic Education is a "tool of liberation or exploitation". As Peter Buckland has noted (Kenton at Glencairn, 1981) the de Lange Commission worked on the assumption that the present economic and political status quo in South Africa will be maintained, that development equals economic growth and is relatively unproblematic and that compulsory Basic Education should be designed to fit these "facts". Certainly, Basic Education is illusory if its designers refuse to see that the mixture as before - some modified or adapted form of conventional primary education - can only lead to the frustration and reaction occasioned by the inadequacies of the present conventional provision. Under these circumstances Basic Education equates with Education for the Status quo, a status quo regarded as unsatisfactory by a growing number of people.

7. BASIC EDUCATION REFORMULATED

An attack on Basic Education as a resprayed and slimmed down off-road vehicle for rural education is incomplete without some proposals on what Basic Education should offer the rural poor - and what it should not offer.

It is given that Basic Education is basic. It is not given that it is also terminal. Education is not neutral. It may either constrain or empower. By default or deliberately it may reinforce the status quo or it may, in Green's terms, contribute to change. A viable and honest programme of Basic Education therefore

- contributes to political and economic change
- has medium and long term aims as well as a necessarily immediate impact
- deals with the problem of passivity in the rural poor who may be exploited, powerless, leaderless, rather than actors.

What ingredients of a Basic Education programme are to be included if such aims are to be met?

8. TOWARDS AUTHENTIC BASIC EDUCATION

Ann Seidman, in a post script to "The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa" (1977), suggests that the problems of rural poverty require major political and economic measures to solve them -

- creation of new rural institutions for increasing participation in productivity, industrial and agricultural activities
- new political institutions to ensure effective participation in government by the rural peasant
- redesigning of government machinery to coordinate the spread of productive industrial and agricultural activities into remote rural areas
- development of long term physical and financial plans to create balanced industrial and agricultural sectors, reduce external dependence, create a national incomes policy and to distribute wealth more equitably
- basic industries, banks, foreign and internal wholesale trade (the "commanding heights") should be controlled by government to achieve long term physical and financial goals
- regional co-operation should be developed to produce economies of scale (Note : Seidman indicates that only the RSA has the resources and infrastructure to achieve these aims)

If a programme of Basic Education is viewed in the light of these kinds of needs then a general formulation would involve

- Education for credibility - who promotes and controls the education system and to what ends?
- Education which contributes to and prepares for change - not a characteristic of much of our current practice.
- Education for equity - redressing the imbalances which favour the urban and better-off men rather than women.
- Education for competence - skill based, building on the primary cultural instruments.
- Education adapted for short, medium and long term ends - too frequently Basic Education is terminal and short-lived.
- Education for empowerment - education which leads to knowledge of and use of rights - social and political.

More specifically an authentic Basic Education for rural communities would include

- Basic tools of literacy and numeracy and knowledge of health care;
- Employment directed skills of administration, organisation, presentation, communication;
- Leverage skills for obtaining access to resources, influencing local and central government;
- Leadership skills, particularly in Freire's sense of "problematizing" the environment, questioning and enquiring.

But to escape a charge of more rhetoric such a programme of Basic Education must be linked to the kinds of changes Seidman proposes. Without these major economic and political moves Basic Education for the rural poor remains illusory.

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