Uma Lele, The Design of Rural Development: Lessons from Africa, A World Bank Research Publication (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1975) pp. xiii+246, $3.95 (paper).

Not so long ago, most economists who thought about agricultural development in poor countries shared a common perception of what was wrong and what was needed to 'get agriculture going.' Lack of demand for agricultural output was widely viewed as the key constraint to expansion, although this was less clearly so for export crops than for local staples. And increased output required a well-defined package of inputs and policies: a suitable technology, more effective extension efforts, expanded availability of credit and other facilities for acquisition of inputs, improved marketing institutions and policies; more feeder reads and an incentive price for outputs. In some places, controlled water supply and reform of land tenure arrangements were additional critical elements in the package.

These still remain tried and true prescriptions for agricultural growth. But things have gotten a lot more complicated lately. Increased output is no longer enough. Output expansion must benefit the rural poor. And there is a widespread consensus that for both welfare and other reasons, export crops are no longer to be the sole or even the main focus of agricultural development efforts; local food crop production must also grow faster than before.

Uma Lele's book reflects these new preoccupations. It is based on an African Rural Development Survey undertaken by the World Bank between 1971 and 1974. It is highly operational in focus. The Bank wanted to find out more about 'how to develop the subsistence rural sector.' It wanted 'guidelines, based on analysis of past experience, for design and implementation of the World Bank's future rural development programs in Africa.'

This is a concern of some significance, since the Bank has become the biggest single source of foreign aid to agriculture, and the Bank's agricultural lending is increasing fast. According to a recent estimate the Bank contributes about 5% of total annual public sector investment in LDC agriculture: the volume of lending has risen from an average of $120 million in the 1960s to $1.6 billion a year in the mid-1970s. (M. Yudelman, 'The Role of Agriculture in Integrated Rural Development Projects – The Experience of the World Bank,' paper presented at International Conference of Agricultural Economists, Nairobi, July–August, 1976.)

The author's approach is intensely empirical. She looks at 17 rural development projects and programs, selected from a group of 60 such projects in Africa, the selection being made on the basis of general interest and representivity. She sifted all the published and unpublished information about the projects, including official appraisal reports and unofficial evaluations. Special evaluation studies were commissioned. Ms. Lele then went out to Africa to talk to people knowledgeable about the projects, and to look at them for herself. She did all this from the perspective of a well-trained and experienced agricultural economist.

The result is an informative, useful, highly realistic book, full of insights into problems of rural development and rich with illustrations of typical pitfalls in efforts to accelerate agricultural change – especially when the objectives are not only to increase output but to broaden the participation in the benefits of growth. On the whole, the projects which are reviewed do not come out too well by the new criteria, which is not surprising since most of them were not designed with the new criteria in view. Many of the projects do not come out too well even by the old cost–benefit criteria, with benefits measured in terms of plain output increases. But this is not surprising either since agricultural development projects have not had a particularly distinguished track record anywhere in the world.

Of the many suggestive issues highlighted in the book, several stand out. The first is the frequent conflict between welfare objectives and efficient resource use. It is certainly essential to be sensitive to income distribution and welfare objectives in the agriculture sector, as more generally. But the name of the game remains growth in output and income; projects or programs which fail to increase output can bring enduring benefit to poor people (or others) only if there are resources available for continuing subsidization, coupled with continuing political willingness to subsidize. In really poor countries, such as most of those in Africa, these conditions rarely exist.

Ms. Lele emphasizes this welfare-growth conflict particularly in discussing social service expenditures (water, rural clinics, etc.). She stresses the need for expenditure balance, and argues that in general, there seems to be a propensity in many countries to spend too much on relatively nonproductive services. It is precisely in countries most deeply committed to increasing rural welfare (e.g. Tanzania) that the expenditure imbalance seems most pronounced.

The second important set of issues relates to organizational matters. Lele has two chapters on 'Forms of Rural Development Administration.' They are among the most interesting in the book, mainly because they indicate something about what lessons the Bank is learning from its rural development experience. Lele shows in detail how the Bank's propensity to establish autonomous project authorities for their rural development projects creates serious problems for the normal machinery of agricultural administration – a dual salary structure, a parallel regional administration, etc. She also describes in detail the extreme complexities of absorbing these autonomous agencies into the regular government machinery. Her analysis strongly suggests that the Bank and other donors ought to work through existing public agencies in the African countries, rather than setting up more of these affluent, autonomous, indigestible organizations. This is not a new conclusion, but it has rarely been illustrated so forcefully. What is interesting is the lack of evidence in recent Bank projects that the analysis is taken seriously, since autonomous project authorities continue to flower.

The book is not without some shortcomings. It tends to lean rather heavily on the Kenyan and Ethiopian projects, which are in certain respects not representative. The problems of tenure and land reform which are so important in those countries are not common elsewhere in the continent; as Ms. Lele mentions in her survey of production systems, land remains relatively abundant in most of Africa. The writing is on occasion diplomatically obscure. For example, after noting that Tanzanian grain imports had risen from 15,000 tons in 1973 to 463,000 tons in 1974 and 430,000 tons in 1975, she writes: 'Although initially drought was thought to be the major reason, later analysis indicates that the main cause was an acceleration of the forces which have caused demand to outgrow supply over the past seven years.' This presumably means declining domestic production due to bad price policy, bad marketing organization, questionable overall agricultural strategies. It would have been nice to have been told more along these lines, since general policy and strategy considerations play a far more important role in agricultural development than any project or set of projects, as Ms. Lele reminds us so appropriately throughout the book.

But these are small faults in an admirable work, which is sure to become standard reading for all students of development.

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