

CHAPTER SIX

ORGANIZATIONAL VARIABLES

6.1 Soil Conservation and Community Groups

The thrust of this analysis has emphasized the desirability of searching out ecologically restorative strategies permitting individual peasants to generate self-sustaining profits as the best route to eventual soil conservation. The emphasis is on the profit-making peasant household, not on the community per-se. But even the most fanatic advocate of individual profit-making as the prime developmental goal will have to recognize the importance of groups for any development project. Even if one does not ascribe to the quasi-religious emphasis placed by some developmental philosophies on community groups as the royal road to developmental salvation, one is still forced to recognize the practical impossibility of having an agency deal individually with thousands of peasant households. Whether you view it as a necessary good or a necessary evil, local group formation is a central element in the developmental process.

But if group structures can facilitate development, they can also effectively sabotage it. In this section I will analyze the role which different types of local groups have played in tree planting and wall building in rural Haiti, paying particular attention to the

dynamics which have shunted many projects off into directions that have little to do with long range soil conservation.

C.11 Rise of Collector - Distributors

One of the difficulties in understanding the dynamics of what has happened with groups in rural Haiti is the large gap which exists between the rhetoric--the stated ideals--of groups and the actual functions which groups have carried out. Developmentally oriented community groups--i.e. groups whose stated purpose has been "development"--have existed in rural Haiti for over 25 years. But the actual functioning of these groups has frequently departed from what most observers would call development. In their actual functioning they have frequently played the role of simple collector-distributors of food and other resources supplied by foreign developmental agencies.

The major spurts of development assistance in Haiti have been associated with one or another famine-producing ecological crisis, generally a hurricane. From the point of view of Haitian community groups, hurricane Hazel of the early fifties can be viewed as an important starting point. Hurricanes have triggered off the shipment of vast amounts of food and other resources from abroad. In-country agencies such as CWS, CARE, HACHO and others then have the very practical task of distributing these perishable goods, hopefully into areas where they will reach those who most need them.

Back in the 1950's before HACHO had come into existence, and when CWS was probably the major food distributing organization in the country, there was as yet little adherence to the now dominant theme of "institution building"--the tendency to view the major development task as that of "supporting" and "strengthening" whatever government happens to be in power. The emphasis, rather, was still on the practical, humanitarian task of distributing emergency resources. It is in this context that "community development groups" began forming among the Haitian peasants, and it is this dynamic which continues to dominate the genesis and functioning of many community groups in rural Haiti, including those which have been used to carry out soil conservation activities.

The groups came into existence, not of spontaneous community dynamics, but as a result of the logistical difficulties which prevented relief agencies from dealing individually with thousands of peasant households. The agencies called for community groups as a prerequisite to receiving aid--and the communities responded with an alacrity born of genuine material distress. From a small number of "conseils Communautaires" formed in the Fort-Jacques area in the fifties, rural Haiti has witnessed the burgeoning of thousands of groups across the entire rural landscape.

But the character of most of the groups that have been formed has been determined by the conditions of their birth; the original groups were formed in impoverished and/or disaster-ridden communities as

vehicles for attracting and distributing the food and money of the suddenly ubiquitous blancs. This must be perceived clearly. Whatever the developmental rhetoric, the actual major function of these groups has been to attract, to collect, and to distribute.

This is not meant as a criticism of the groups. Such groups can serve certain essential functions. From the viewpoint of relief agencies, they have facilitated the unloading of enormous quantities of food and other resources. From the point of view of the communities, they have been the vehicle which has successfully attracted the attention of food-bearing blan and have thus been a major mechanism for the infusion of truly needed resources. In labeling these groups as collector-distributor units, I am not dismissing them as useless. In a country such as Haiti, especially after hurricanes, they may be precisely what is needed.

The problem arises when the collecting-distributing function reasserts itself and comes to dominate in projects whose success depends on a different type of dynamic. I must allude to a distinction which I made earlier between two types of profit seeking that occur in the context of development programs. There is first of all the self-sustained profit making that is introduced and perpetuated in a region such as Furcy, in which new profit-making techniques are incorporated into the agrarian repertoire of the peasant community. And there is the second form of profit-seeking which restricts itself to the opportunistic collection and distribution of outside resources, which entails no permanent, profit-generating changes in the economic behavior of the peasants.

In designing (and evaluating) soil conservation projects, we are primarily interested in the first type of change. Restoration of the environment cannot take place through one-shot interventions; it presupposes, rather, permanent changes in local agrarian technology. And I have argued that such changes will occur only if they are associated with visible, self-sustaining profit-making of the first type mentioned above.

It is here that many reforestation and terracing projects have foundered. The project organizers have not succeeded in introducing tree planting and wall building in a manner that renders them clearly profitable to the peasant. On the contrary. In some instances, projects have barreled in and proceeded in a fashion that the peasant has perceived as detrimental to his interests.

But because these projects have also come with enormous infusions of food and other resources, the collecting-distributing function has asserted itself, and communities have accepted or at least tolerated the projects. The groups that have carried out the projects have, in many cases, not been the type of group that can generate self-sustaining profits of the first type, but that simply channel the short-term flow of project food and money.

6.12 The Community Council: Occasional Agent of Reforestation

The most common type of group found throughout rural Haiti is the Konsej Kominote, the Community Council. These groups, although they have no juridical status in Haitian law analogous to that, for example, of cooperatives, they tend to have a well-elaborated formal internal structure--president, secretary, treasurer, and other formalized roles. Membership in these councils is based on residence in a community; leadership roles almost invariably fall to better off members of the community, in many cases members whose occupation may place them in a different social class from the mass of the peasants.

In some cases of reforestation--including much of the reforestation stemming from the Fermathe nursery--the community councils are the active units. The president or some other leader will communicate with the nursery administrators and an arrangement will be made for members of the council to pick up a specified number of plants and transport them--generally on their heads--back to the community.

These councils are among the few that have ever been observed to plant trees without the stimulus of food for work.

6.13 The Ekip: Ephemeral Work Gang

But most of the tree planting (and wall building) has entailed food for work. And the presence of this stimulus generally triggers off fierce competition for the privilege of entering the payroll. This dynamic has led in many cases to the formation and utilization of groups that have already been alluded to in this report: the work gang (Ekip).

The work-gang can be characterized as a group with the following characteristics:

1. A fixed number of members, generally rigidly adhered to.
2. No internal organization except for the differentiation between forman and worker.
3. Ephemeral existence, in some projects the groups being dissolved and reconstituted at the end of each month work.
4. No residential requirement, total outsiders frequently being incorporated into the group.
5. No tasks which extend beyond the specific task for which payment is being made.

It must be pointed out that the ekip is probably the most convenient form of work unit to utilize from the point of view of the disbursement of wages, be they in the form of food or cash.

Its convenience probably accounts for the large number of projects that have eventually adopted it as their organizational model. But from a developmental point of view, the work gang must be seen as defective. The inclusion of outsiders who have no local interest in the land, the ephemerality of the group, its constitution for one sole purpose, will eventually leave the project community without any functioning units to carry out the long-range surveillance and maintenance functions required by soil conservation projects. Planners who ascribe to the desirability of forming functional community groups as an integral part of any development project will be particularly **dissatisfied** with the work gang. One is justified in suspecting that the project which utilizes the work-gang as the principal action unit is a project which has bypassed the task of community organization in a rush to start the work rolling and the Food for Work flowing.

6.14 Characteristics of the Ideal Group

There is no one single group model which can be enthroned as superior, but we can insist that the groups have at least certain characteristics.

1. Membership based on some common interest. This could be residence in the same community or--perhaps even more promising--ownership or cropping interest in contiguous plots of ground that will be treated as a physical unit by the erosion control project.



2. Smallness of size. Common participation in decisions will be more likely in groups of ten or fifteen than in unwieldy community councils of sixty or seventy.

3. Operational decision making power. Ideally the groups would have some autonomy in planning certain aspects of their work, rather than being simple followers of orders, as is the case with the work gang. They may perhaps be able to schedule their own work days, choose the particular complex of erosion control devices which they prefer (in consultation with technicians, of course), ~~have some say~~ as to the timing of the disbursement of remuneration, if the latter is used, and so on.

4. Multiple functions. These groups should be organized in such a fashion that they might be able to carry out other tasks as well, besides the tasks for which they were first organized.

5. Longevity. The groups should be able to last for several years, during the entire "maintenance phase" of the project. One of the defects of most current and past projects has been the absence of maintenance provisions. But in order for these provisions to be built in, the groups formed must be stable.