
Community Organization Through Cassava Production: Towards a Mobilization of the South African Peasantry

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ABSTRACT

Technology developed at the international agricultural research centers can be regarded as successful only when adopted in the production situation. A rural development program geared to the application of CIAT cassava technology in peasant farming systems in South Africa is examined.

A brief history of land allocation and the colonization of Zululand is presented. An analysis of the tribal authority system, used by the British and adopted by the central government of South Africa as a form of control, shows this system to be a hindrance to development.

The manner in which the cassava development program is being conducted aims at not only improving agricultural production but also at acting as a catalyst for organizational development. A considerable degree of organization has been achieved in the 18 months during which the project has been running. The strategy adopted in this project--community organization through physical programs--could be applied with other crops and in other parts of the world.

The rationale behind establishment and financing of the international agricultural research centres was and still is that research would ultimately benefit farmers of the Third World. Technology developed and information generated at these centres is of benefit only when actually applied. Likewise new crop varieties justify the expense incurred in their development only when they prove themselves in the production situation.

The centres, however, do not, and possibly cannot, accept responsibility for the implementation of improved technology and must therefore at times experience the frustration of having developed varieties and techniques which are not being adopted. National institutions have the responsibility of "selling" the methods to farmers who are generally regarded as conservative.

This paper examines a rural development program in South Africa which is geared precisely to applying such technology, i.e., CIAT cassava production techniques, to the advantage of peasant farmers. It also examines the power structure in a neo-colonial situation and suggests that it is the powerlessness of peasant communities, rather than peasant conservatism, that is the basis of underdevelopment.

While the analysis is of the situation in a particular region of South Africa there are sure to be many parallels which can be drawn with peasant communities elsewhere in the world and hopefully a contribution will be made to the orientation of other development programs.

Location of the Project

The Mpukunyoni Development Project is in Zululand in the province of Natal with the Mpukunyoni area itself covering around 700 sq km between latitudes 28° S and 28.5° S. It has a seasonal subtropical climate with an average annual rainfall of under 800 mm in the west increasing to 1,000 mm in the east.

The boundaries of the Mpukunyoni area were first defined by the Zululand Lands Delimitation Commission of 1902-4 set up by the British Government to define tribal boundaries in Zululand and to set aside land for purchase. This move followed the military defeat of the Zulus in 1879 and the annexation of Zululand to the British colony of Natal in 1897.

In negotiating with the Zulu chiefs the commissioners assured them that they would have the right to bid for the land that would be set aside for purchase. When the delimitation was completed, however, only white settlers were allowed to occupy this land with the Zulus being confined to the occupation of the tribal areas defined by the commissioners. Natal joined the Union of South Africa in 1910 and this racial division of land was re-inforced by the Lands Acts of 1912 and 1936 and persists to this day.

The Tribal Authority System

When the British colonized Natal and Zululand they were faced with the task of administering and controlling a large indigenous population with only a handful of British officials. This they accomplished by co-opting the existing system of tribal chiefs and headmen. The 1878 and 1891 Codes of Natal Native Law placed the power to appoint and remove chiefs in the hands of the Governor of the Colony of Natal who then became the "Supreme Chief." The Zulu chiefs then became minor deputies of the governor.

Since the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and subsequently the Republic of South Africa in 1961, the co-option of the chiefs has been reinforced. The Native Administration Act of 1927, the 1967 Natal Code of Bantu Law, and the 1974 KwaZulu Chiefs' and Headmen's Act have all made the chiefs responsible to central authority rather than to their own people. Just as this system was used by the British to colonize Natal and other parts of the world, so has it been used by the minority South African Government to control and manipulate a vast black rural population.

While an examination of the functioning of the tribal authority system shows it to be a mechanism for control it is in fact clouded by the myth of representation. The chiefs used to be the representatives of the people prior to colonization and are still perceived as such by many development agents and aid sources. Thus rural development projects and development aid are channeled through the chiefs and their deputies.

Without representative organizations with whom development agents can discuss projects, many schemes fail and the benefits in others are appropriated by a small group of powerful individuals. Existing inequalities in rural societies are rein-

forced and little progress is made towards physical or organizational development. The lack of equality in local structures is likely to be a problem in many developing societies and in fact research in Pakistan shows a positive association between greater equality of social power distribution and the adoption of agricultural innovations (Freeman et al., 1982).

It is therefore within a historical framework of colonial manipulation of Zulu society and within the present day inequalities of the South African system that the Mpukunyoni Development Project has to operate.

Mpukunyoni Development Project

The Mpukunyoni Development Project, which started at the beginning of 1981, is financed by the Anglo American Corporation of South Africa and co-ordinated by the Centre for Research and Documentation of the University of Zululand. The starting point of the project is the provision of assistance on credit to peasant farmers to produce cassava for industrial processing. African Products Ltd., a subsidiary of the Anglo American Corporation, guarantees a market for cassava produced by Mpukunyoni farmers and plans to establish a starch extraction plant in the vicinity.

A total of 60 growers established cassava fields in the 1981/82 planting season (October to February) and a program is under way to include more than 100 new growers in the current 1982/83 planting season. A shortage of planting material limited plantings to one-half hectare per grower initially with the intention to expand individual holdings when top growth is ready for propagation.

While cassava is the chief physical component of the project, considerable assistance is also being given to the Mpukunyoni community in provision of domestic water supplies and in cultivation of other crops such as cotton, sweet potatoes, citrus, and vegetables. Research and development work is geared towards meeting as broad a range of needs as possible.

The activities of the project must however be seen within the underlying philosophy of the project which can best be described as "community organization through physical programs" and specifically "community organization through cassava production." Account is taken of the shortcomings of the tribal authority system and the lack of representative structures described above and the project is implemented in a manner designed to contribute towards remedying this situation.

Allocation of cassava planting material and other benefits of the project are spread as widely as possible to include many people in the initial phases of the project. This promotes the development of organizations representing large numbers of rural people, and is in fact the opposite of the "demonstration" strategy which assumes that if one works with a select group of individuals these individuals will pass on technological skills to others.

Access to technology and information can be used by an elite to reinforce their positions of power and to appropriate disproportionate amounts of aid. The project therefore deals with farmers associations rather than individuals and encourages steps towards the democratic functioning of these associations. The concept of constitutions which protect members rights has been introduced and much effort is put into membership education not only on technological matters but also on organizational procedure.

Thus a physical program such as the promotion of cassava production becomes a vehicle around which peasant farmers mobilize in order to form representative associations which not only co-ordinate their agricultural activities but also represent the interests of their members on a broader level.

Cassava as a Catalyst

Organization does not take place in a vacuum and for a farmers association to go from strength to strength the activities of that association must meet with success. Cassava as a pivot for organization appears to be well suited to the Mpukonyoni area. It is an area of erratic rainfall where the standard subsistence and cash crops (largely maize and cotton) often fail completely. Cassava has already proved its drought tolerance and initial research indicates that the variety M Saf 2 can be expected to produce 24 tons of fresh root per hectare per annum on a commercial basis (Daphne, 1980).

Cassava production techniques follow closely the recommendations and technology developed at CIAT. The selection and dipping of planting stakes is done to ensure crop hygiene while a stringent eradication program was conducted at the end of 1979 to ensure that cassava bacterial blight (identified in South Africa in 1978) did not enter the production area. The same care in distribution of planting material is exercised to keep cassava mosaic virus out of the production area while a longer term breeding program has been initiated to produce resistant varieties.

Appropriate technology such as the CIAT-developed harvester blade is used to ensure a balance between an efficiently run operation and the demand for work in the Mpukonyoni area. While much assistance with operations is provided by African Products, Ltd., at this stage the intention is that peasant farmers and their associations will completely control their own cassava production within a short period of time.

Impact of the Project

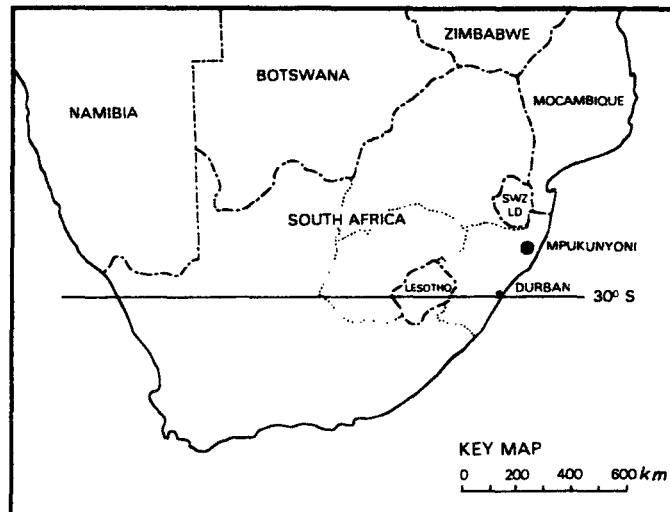
In terms of the initial aim of the project, to promote community organization, considerable success has been achieved. The Mpukonyoni Cassava Growers Association was formed on April 14, 1982 and a constitution was adopted on June 23. The cassava program and also the general increase in agricultural and organizational activity in the area has led to the formation of an association representing cotton growers and also to the formation of 12 localized farmers associations dealing in general agriculture. On September 29, representatives from the various associations came together to form the Mpukonyoni Farmers Union representing over 1,000 households in the area.

This body while not directly challenging the tribal authority system, has the potential to provide an alternative system of representation. Agricultural and other developments will have a forum for discussion and aid can be channeled through elected office bearers thus ensuring a more equitable distribution of benefits.

While the socio-political process described here refers to a specific project in South Africa it is believed that this particular philosophy of development has application in many other parts of the developing world. Peasant societies are often poor because they do not have effective local structures for voicing

opinions and demands. For similar reasons development aid often seems not to reach the people who really require it.

Thus although the Mpukunyoni Development Project is confined to a small corner of the globe we are hoping to contribute towards a model of development which can be adapted to the benefit of the rural poor elsewhere.



Location of Mpukunyoni area within southern Africa.

References

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