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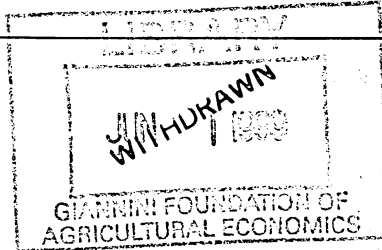
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**AGRICULTURAL ADMINISTRATION  
(RESEARCH AND EXTENSION) NETWORK**

**NETWORK PAPER 50**

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**LINKING FARMERS' ORGANISATIONS  
AND RESEARCHERS:  
FOUR CASE STUDIES**

- 50a The Sustainable use of Natural Resources by Community Organisations in Central America: The Experience of the Olafo Project by *Tania Ammour*
- 50b Diverse and Linked: Farmers' Organisations in Tanzania by *Amon Z Mattee and Thierry Lassalle*
- 50c Birth of a Small Farmers' Group in Guinea by *Pierre Krebs and Jean Vogel*
- 50d Building a Dialogue between Researchers and Small Farmers: the Tocantins Agro-Ecology Centre (CAT) in Brazil by *Marcia G Muchagata, Vincent de Reynal and Iran P Veiga Jr*

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## EDITORIAL DISCUSSION

John Farrington  
Overseas Development Institute

These four papers are to be presented at the International Symposium on Farming Systems Research and Extension to be held in Montpellier, France, from November 21-25 1994.<sup>1</sup> They are reproduced here since they address a number of issues of central concern to the ODI/ISNAR Farmers' Organisations study.

The four papers all have certain elements in common:

- the impetus for working with farmer groups arose from the inadequate performance of conventional "project-led" or top-down approaches;
- all seek closer understanding of farmers' objectives and constraints, of the dynamics of group formation and support, and of current and potential interaction among groups and between them and external agents;
- all are written from the perspective of natural resources researchers, seeking to understand how they best gain the confidence of farmers and increase farmers' influence on the objectives and processes of research and development.

Beyond these basic similarities, the papers clearly differ in important respects:

- **Paper 50a** summarises CATIE's experience in working with local groups in natural resources management at three locations in Central America. It is particularly concerned with the need for projects with a resource conservation perspective to be supportive of (or at minimum, consistent with) farmers' own objectives if they are to succeed. From this arise the

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<sup>1</sup> The permission of the Scientific Committee of the Montpellier FSR/E Symposium to publish these papers in the Agricultural Research and Extension Network is gratefully acknowledged.

The assistance of John Nelson and Sue Squire in translating and editing three of the four papers presented here is gratefully acknowledged.

complexities of reconciling short- and long-term resource-management perspectives.

- **Paper 50b** documents the interaction between a university research team and farmers' groups in horticultural production in Tanzania, and the subsequent emergence of a network of farmer groups.
- **Paper 50c** describes how farmers' groups in Guinea were instrumental in obtaining and spreading the new technology necessary for potato production, and in bringing about changes in government policy which had previously favoured potato imports.
- **Paper 50d** traces how new methodologies of interaction between researchers and farmers' groups evolved in new "frontier" settlements in Brazil, in order to move from a situation in which researchers dominated the process of technology development to one in which farmers have a voice.

Taken together, these papers provide a rich empirical background against which some of the preliminary ideas coming out of the ODI/ISNAR study (see Network Paper 47 with this mailing) can be examined. We look forward to continuing interaction with network members and with the authors of these papers on these issues.

Paper 50d

**BUILDING A DIALOGUE BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND  
SMALL FARMERS: THE TOCANTINS AGRO-ECOLOGY  
CENTRE (CAT) IN BRAZIL**

Marcia G Muchagata, Vincent de Reynal and Iran P Veiga Jr

**ABSTRACT**

*The general objective of CAT (Tocantins Agro-ecology Centre) working in a Brazilian Amazonia frontier region, is to improve the living conditions of low income farmers. It is based upon a liaison between researchers and farmers' organisations. After five years of operation, we have noted that these organisations' participation in the direction of the programme, and especially the research itself, develop in the way that was hoped. Firstly, the small farmers' organisations are going through a transition period which is reflected both in their practices and in their self-identity. They are having problems drawing up proposals which would attract more small farmers. Secondly, the research team needs to develop more sensitive scientific tools to build a dialogue with farmers. We analysed the obstacles to this dialogue. Starting from the principle that the process of development of knowledge can be stimulated by discussion among small farmers, and between small farmers and researchers, an attempt was made to set up a process which encouraged dialogue between the world of research and the world of development.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The study of the dialogue between research and development presented here is based on work carried out at the Tocantins Agro-Ecology Centre (CAT). This programme, located in a particularly dynamic frontier region – Sud du Para in Brazilian Amazonia – has been working in Maraba since 1989. It aims to participate in the setting up of a strong family-based agriculture, implementing systems of sustainable exploitation of the environment, based on a close collaboration between researchers and small farmers' groups.



We have seen from the five years this programme has been running how difficult it is to build a real partnership between those involved in research and those involved in development. This report seeks to identify the problems and blockages hindering this process, to analyse their cause, and to present the ways the research groups intend to overcome them.

## **THE FRAMEWORK FOR DIALOGUE**

Occupation of the Maraba region, in eastern Brazilian Amazonia, began with the arrival of the Trans-Amazonian road in 1972, and intensified in the 1980s. Over the years there were many violent conflicts between migrant farmers and others greedy for land. It was during this period of struggle for land tenure that most small farmers' organisations in the region were emancipated from the central government power that had created them some years earlier. This movement was supported by some sectors of the Catholic Church, especially members of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT). A group of researchers from the Federal University of Para (UFPA) began socio-economic research work supporting the movement of farmers' organisations (basic communities, syndicates and associations). They were also strongly supported by the Church, then the main opponents of the ruling dictatorship. Once the land was won and the fighting had become less intense, work began to consolidate the small farmers' organisations and to guarantee the stable conditions needed for land settlement to take place peacefully (Hébette, 1991).

There were two main groups involved in this process; the union leaders and their advisors, representing the farmers, and a handful of academics from the university.

### **The union leaders' thinking**

Evidence from the co-founder of the programme, a farmer and former union president of one of the villages in the region in question (Barros, 1992) gives us a clear picture of the thinking of the union leaders. These leaders thought that if they did nothing, there would be little left from these years of bloody struggle, when they had fought to win the right to the land by and for many thousands of families. The union leaders knew how much the desire for land had mobilised people, and how much the struggle for land had unified/organised them. They realised that once the land was won and the farmers were safe in their rights of possession, the union would have to stay involved with the concerns of the farmers, or it would risk collapse, or at best a return to their work as mere service providers which they had before the struggle. If this had

happened, the everyday hard work which had gone into the formation of independent syndicates would have been lost for ever and with it all hope of the existence of genuine organisations able to defend the interests of the small farmers. These leaders asked their old allies for institutional, financial and technical support which would help to turn the situation in favour of the small farmers.

### **The Universities' thinking**

The small group of allied universities who wished to participate actively in developing a stable and sustainable family agriculture in Amazonia brought in new research practices to be carried out in close cooperation with the farmers. This collaboration was not to be limited to simple good will on both parts, but was to take the form of genuine contracts between the two parties. Farmers were to participate actively in the planning and implementation of the research trials.

From the outset it was evident to all that a real dialogue between research and development would have to be supported by the economically and politically independent small farmers' organisations. In contrast with other frontier zones in Amazonia, the colonisation process in the Maraba region had been particularly favourable for the consolidation of a strong community of farmers. Two elements supported this: first, the high number of small farmers who had settled in the region gave these farmers strong political and economic power, and second, the fact that farmers' organisations had been forged through the struggle for land.

It was therefore necessary to set up a team capable of carrying out research for the benefit of small farmers' organisations while at the same time ensuring that these organisations could make themselves heard. This was to be a long-term process.

In consideration of the 'ambitious' project objectives, set in the context of regional and national history, it was important to provide a safe institutional shelter for the project under which it could take cover, until eventually it would be able to become independent and self-sustaining. The Federal State University, because of its relative autonomy from State politics and its sympathy towards the peoples of the interior, undertook this role. Certain national and overseas bodies, including the University of the Antilles and Guyana (AUG), and the Research and Technical Exchange Group (GRET) showed an immediate interest in the programme and gave it their support even though other research institutions had refused because of the project's untraditional approach to

research and development. The scientific and institutional endorsements of AUG and GRET were fundamental to the realisation of the long hoped for process of dialogue between research and development.

## THE FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATION

In response to a request from the union leaders, the universities proposed setting up a programme which would unite the two bodies: development activities carried out by the Agrarian Foundation of Tocantins-Araguaia (FATA), controlled by the unions in the region, and research activities carried out by the Socio-agronomic Laboratory of Tocantins (LASAT), controlled by the universities. The CAT programme revolved around the functioning of these two bodies which were independent but which worked together in close collaboration on the development of all the farmer families across a large region (four communes, 40,000 km<sup>2</sup>, 15,000 families). Direct collaboration between the unions and universities was limited to the areas of production and commerce. An important element of the programme was a centre where farmers, university researchers, students and technicians met and discussed various aspects of the programme together.

## FIRST STEPS FOR CAT

CAT is a programme motivated mainly by Farming Systems Research, and which incorporated from the beginning a participative approach to agricultural research. This could be seen both in its structure and in its philosophy; it had:

*"respect for the farmers' capacity to produce and deal with data ... which makes research an educational process as important for the researcher as for the community"* (Farrington and Martin, 1990).

The collaboration between researchers and farmers was to be on at least two levels:

- firstly, the political and institutional level: guidelines for the programme were to be drawn up through the dialogue between the independent bodies of FATA and LASAT;
- secondly, at the planning stage of proposals: farmers' participation was to take place via discussions among a large number of farmers in the first instance, and then between these farmers and the researchers. This would hopefully reduce one of the limitations faced by Farming Systems Research

projects, namely the difficulty of working on a large area comprising a wide diversity of agro-ecological and socio-economic conditions. (Pillot and Lalau-Keraly, 1984).

The first stage of research was largely a matter of learning how the land was worked in the region, and how this had evolved. This stage highlighted the wide diversity of the region, in terms of the geography, economy, type and location of production. These studies provided some reasons for the rapid movement of families in the area. Much of the movement was a matter of deliberate choice aimed mainly at increasing wealth due to the possibility of land ownership and the buying back of frontier land (income differential). This 'frontier strategy' would eventually empty the region of small farmer families to make way for medium and large size cattle-rearing concerns (LASAT, 1992). This research gave a better understanding of a sinister process which was of great concern to the unions (Barros, 1992, quoted above). It was possible to carry out these studies, in spite of having a small team, by using the services of the farmer union representatives spread throughout the region. These farmers produced periodic summaries of their knowledge of the physical, human, and historical surroundings in which they lived. The researchers synthesised this information, and fed it back to the farmers in seminars (Angelo Menezes *et al.*, 1989). This practice represented the first step in the establishment of a dialogue between researchers and farmers.

Another limitation of Farming Systems Research projects, i.e. the time taken up by preliminary assessments, was in part overcome by carrying out early trials on the commercial feasibility of rice, a crop already grown by small farmers. This work was fine-tuned over time and stimulated greater participation by small farmers, including them in a research-action process (Wambergue, Pereira and de Reynal, 1992). These trials were repeated for several years and eventually resulted in the creation of a cooperative for commercial rice production.

Attempts to define joint research themes revealed the different perceptions of research objectives and possibilities by researchers and farmers. There was not a real 'demand' for research from the unions; at least it was not a matter for a collective process (Albaladejo, 1993). They could have focused on:

- selective problems (e.g. poultry diseases, pests attacking rice) where the farmers presented the problems they thought the researchers could resolve. The farmers were able to identify various concrete problems, many of which were not significant on a regional level;
- demands for off-the-shelf technologies to boost the production of existing cropping systems;

- global issues, in keeping with the political sphere of activity of the unions (demands for transport, health, credit, etc.) which came out of the ethos of the programme from the beginning.

After a period of strength during the fighting, the unions went through a period of transition when they tried to define their new role in the new context: to work toward technical and economic alternatives and/or to lead a political struggle for better living and working conditions. One obstacle to their renewal was the perception of many small farmers who had always seen the unions as service-providers, without feeling obliged to invest in them seriously. Because of their one-track character, gained during their formative years, the unions could have inhibited the emergence of local collective discussion on how to resolve production problems.

One of the research tasks was to contribute towards changing this situation through dialogue with the unions. Dialogue on technical and organisational themes would help the unions to understand better the issues faced, and of the possible roles of research. Then they would be able to formulate clear requests for the researchers and draw up coherent action strategies which would reinforce their independence.

It was noted by some that the difficulty in communication between researchers and the various groups was not limited to vocabulary differences, or to the use of sometimes ineffective animation techniques. The problem lay in the research process as a whole; despite efforts to demonstrate the rationality of small farmers and to value their knowledge, it was always the researchers who defined their problems, determined the research protocols, analysed the data collected, and presented the farmers with a series of final conclusions. The farmers were often more spectators than participants in the process.

## THE DIALOGUE: A SCIENTIFIC QUESTION

In order to overcome the obstacles and build a technical dialogue between the two social groups, the researchers had to develop new methodologies. In order to do this, they worked with the following hypotheses, from the framework of knowledge and information systems.

- 1) The farmers were producers with organisational and technical knowledge. They showed this in adapting their working methods to the region, even though most of them came from other ecological backgrounds.

- 2) The development of this knowledge was in part collective. The process of developing knowledge was stimulated by discussion between the farmers' groups taking part, as well as with different groups and researchers.

These hypotheses allowed us to form a secondary hypothesis: even in similar structural conditions (physical surroundings and socio-economic environment) and different social and historical conditions, origins of the farmers, local organisation and communication networks, communities can contribute to the development of individual knowledge systems, therefore making it possible for different types of production and organisations to exist. Through discussions between farmers from different villages (with similar structural conditions) some of these innovations can be shared. Confronting different ways of thinking and acting on issues could initiate a learning process through which farmers and researchers may change their frames of reference. During this process of adaptation and improvement there are some important roles for researchers, notably stimulation and mediation.

Since the farmers and the researchers

*"have different criteria for evaluating information, adaptation and adoption of new technologies is not exclusively the outcome of feed-back but of a process of negotiation where the participants discuss, re-examine, modify, take up or impose their social objectives and their own criteria for validation of knowledge. In this way a wider process of socio-cultural change (for the farmers and for the researchers), and not just a process of technical change, is brought about"* (Bebbington, 1990).

The wealth of confidence built up towards the farmers' unions during the first stage of the programme has helped to make the organisation of the discussions between the farmers and the researchers easier. The research team has arranged numerous times and places to meet for discussions with the farmers. These special times should facilitate steady discussions between the researchers and farmers throughout the duration of the different research and development activities. Representatives of union organisations taking part in the overall research programme will also attend (Table 1).

The "partnerisation" or establishment of genuine research contracts (planning, implementation, results) which assume that there is a demand for research from the farmers' organisations, comes about through improved mutual understanding. Dialogue doesn't weaken, it builds. In fact, it seems that, apart from obvious questions of language, communication between research and development will only be improved if there is clear representation of each of the social groups in

**Table 1: Meeting structure between researchers and farmers**

Identification	Objectives	Composition	Frequency and place	Working methodology
Basic courses	Learning about unions  Promoting spontaneous discussion among farmers	≠ 15 farmers per village  ≠ 4 villages per course	15 courses per year (or about 1,000 farmers) held at the meeting centre	With the aid of group animation techniques, discussion on farmers' general problems
Research courses	Drawing up of technical, economic and organisational proposals	≠ 4 villages (which have already done the basic courses)  ≠ 15 farmers per village	3 courses per year at the meeting centre	Exchange and discussion between villages on precise topics prepared in advance
Discussion groups on specific themes	Discussion between farmers and researchers on a research theme. These groups can be formed during the research courses	20 farmers (from a mixture of villages) and researchers involved	3 meetings per year at the meeting centre or in the villages	Revision and discussion of research activities and results
Follow-up groups / Action-test evaluation	Evaluation and re-orientation of "action-tests"	To be defined by the unions. For rice, 3 farmers/STR and researchers involved	Ditto. For rice, evaluation 4 times a year at the meeting centre or in the villages	Revision and discussion of "action-test" activities and results

Group Follow-up /evaluation

FATA/LASAT Overall research Divided into 2 sub-groups

a) "Everyday" groups	Followed up closely, they should inform the work of twice-yearly meetings	2 farmers per union and all the researchers	Fortnightly meetings at the meeting centre	Detailed discussion on research themes
b) Twice-yearly meetings	Discussion and re-orientation of tasks	"Daily" group and 4 farmers per union	Twice-yearly meetings at the meeting centre	Presentation and discussion on activities and results

the partnership. If the researchers study the farmers' methods of communication and "partnerisation", they will at the same time offer the farmers the opportunity to get to know them better.

It is undeniable that the presence of two research bodies and farmers' organisations within the same organisation made the project researchers work on their understanding of the difficulties of entering into a dialogue with farmers.

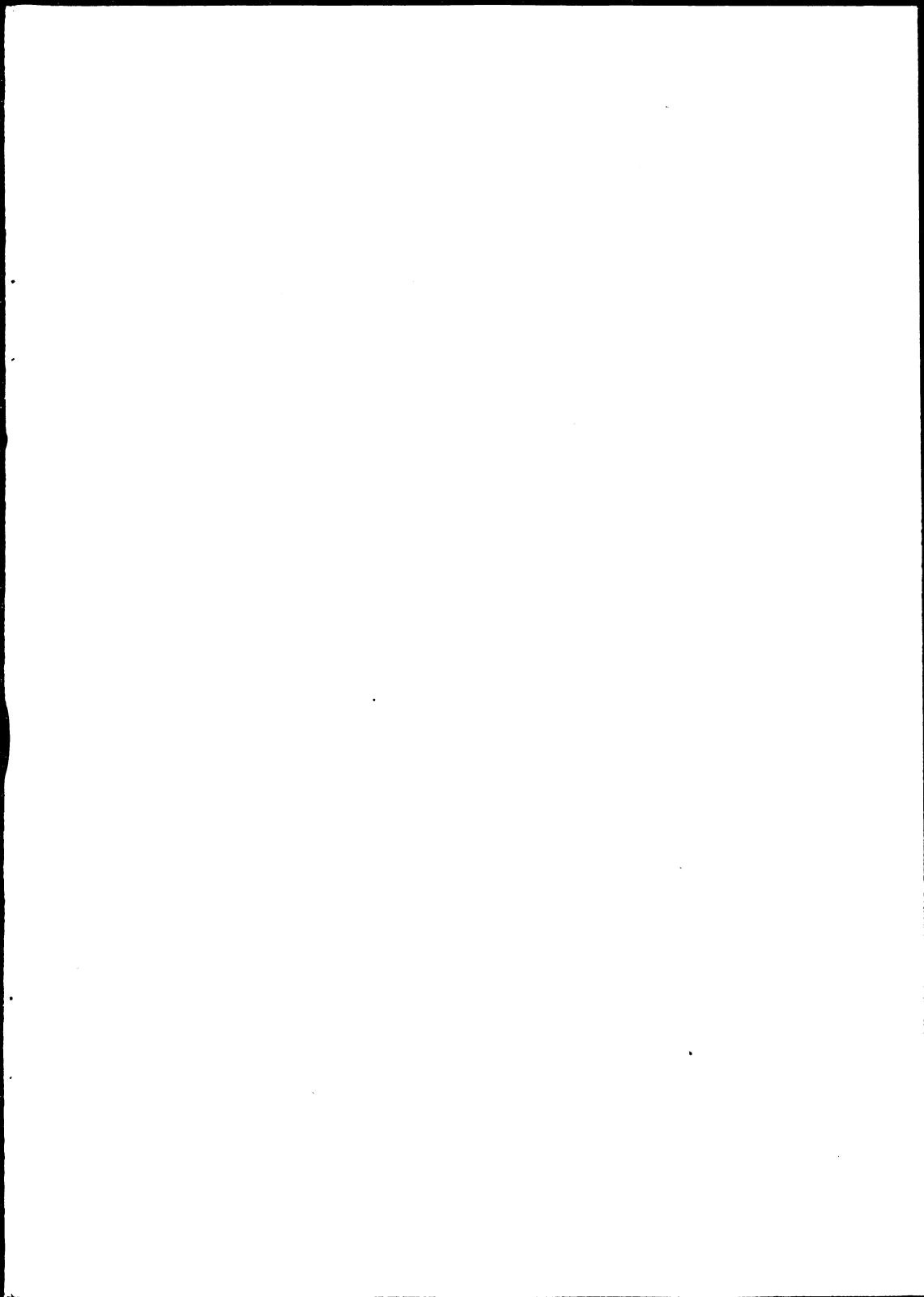
The problems experienced with the initiative put forward to overcome these dialogue issues originated from the same lack of understanding highlighted earlier; the proposals came from researchers to the farmers. Without political power, the farmers had no choice but to once again accept the package of proposals offered. This is a risk faced where a research-development framework is not allowed to evolve with the improvements in communication between researchers and farmers.

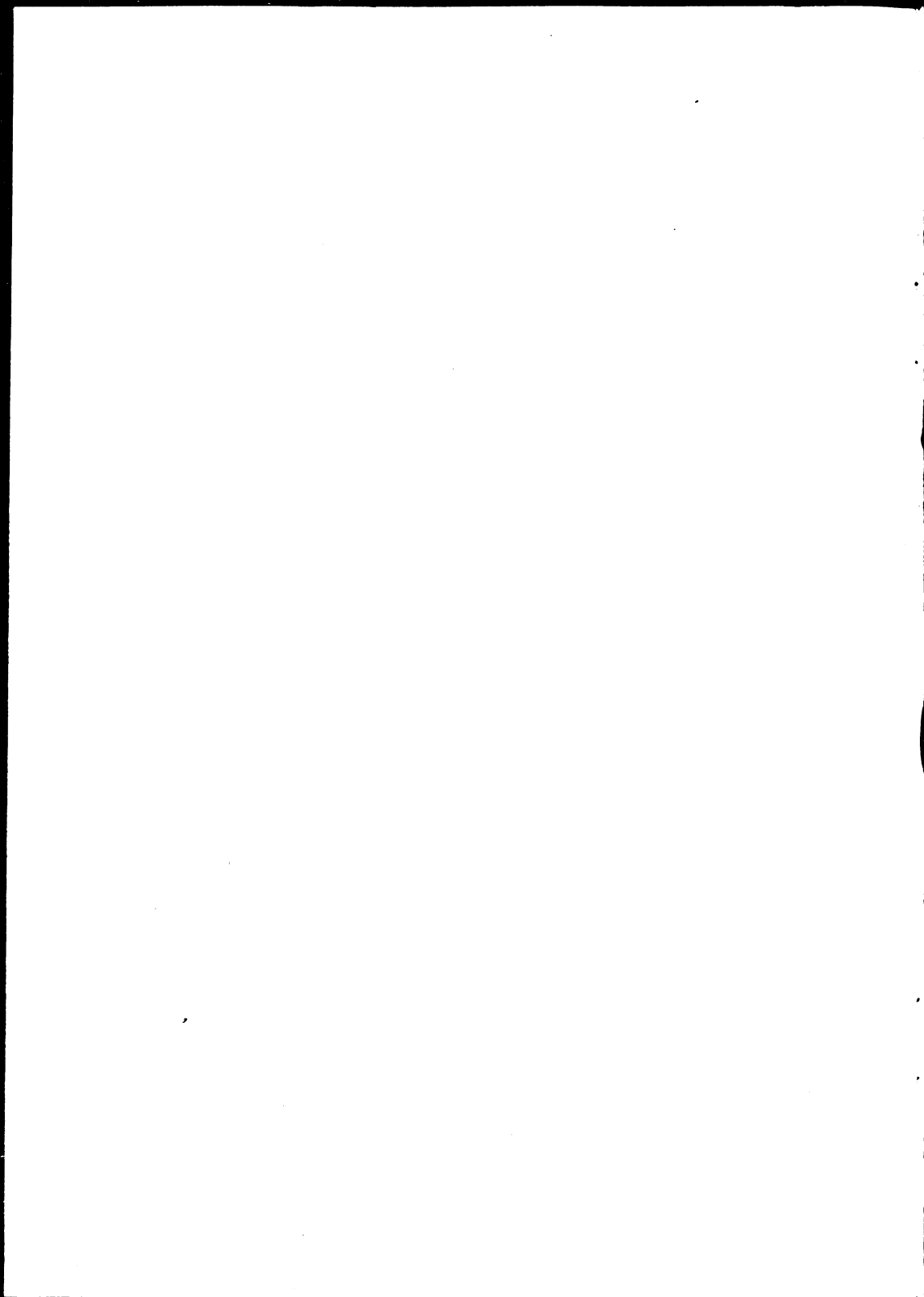
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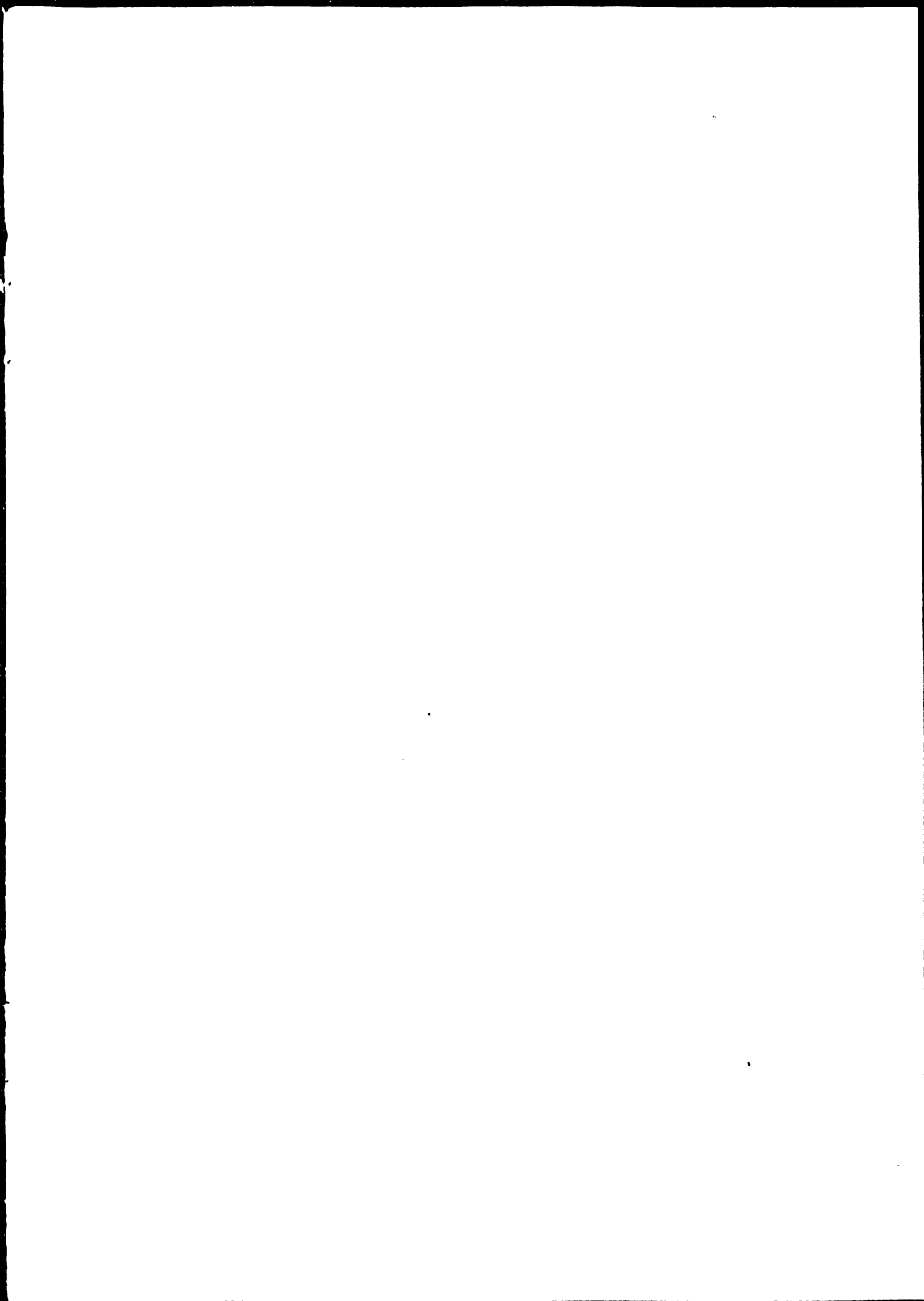
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